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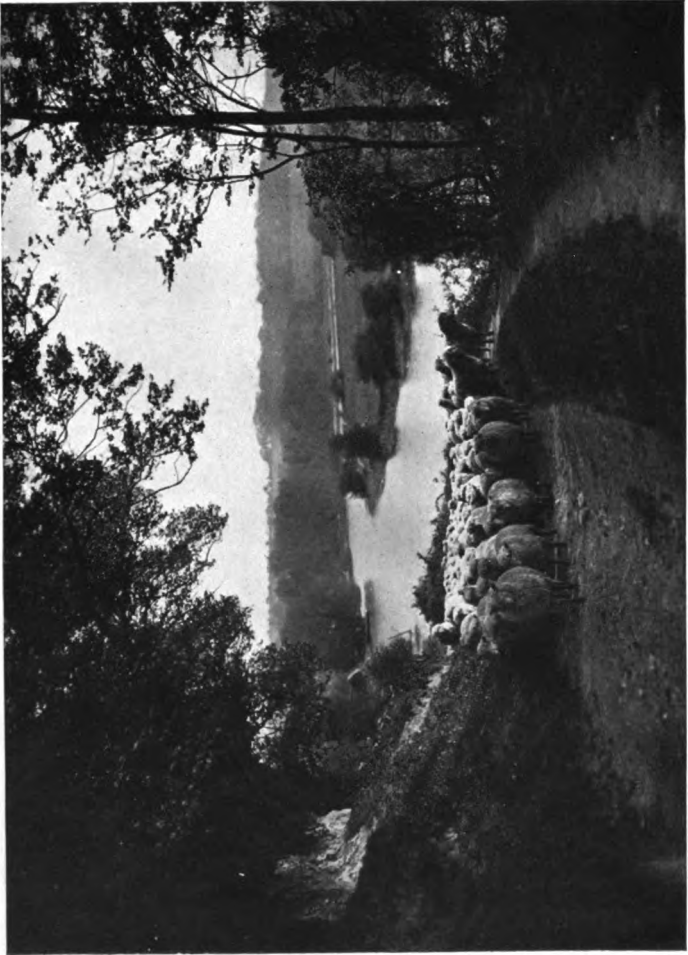
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NEIGHBOURHOOD



HOMeward BOUND

NEIGHBOURHOOD

A YEAR'S LIFE IN AND ABOUT
AN ENGLISH VILLAGE

BY

TICKNER EDWARDES

AUTHOR OF 'THE LORE OF THE HONEY-BEK'

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	xi
JANUARY	I
I. Hard Times—Wild Life and the Frost—The Thaw at Last—Solitude and a Fireside—Cricket Music—Fiction and Life—Wood versus Coal.	
II. Truantry—Spring in January—Wind and Sun on the Downs—A Shepherd Family—Brothers in Arms—'Rowster'—The Folding-Call—Dew-Ponds and their Making—The Sign in the Sky.	
III. The Starling Host.	
FEBRUARY	27
I. The Village Green—Daybreak—The Morning Dew.	
II. Under the 'Seven Sisters'—Courting Days.	
III. The Elm Blossom—A Wild Night—By the River—The Hazel-Wood—Meadow Life.	
IV. The Coming of the Lambs—Night in the Lambing-Pens—The Luck of Windlecombe—'White Eye.'	
MARCH	55
I. The Woodland Clearing—Rabbit and Stoat—The Rain Bird—'Skugging'—The Lovers' Tree—An Adventure in Forestry.	

1. 20

1895

	PAGE
II. The 'Sea-Blue Bird of March'—The Old Ferryman.	
III. Lion and Lamb—The Churchyard Wall—Yew and Almond-Tree—Evensong—A Prophet of Evil.	
IV. Wild March—Rejuvenation—On the Downs—River and Brook—The Long White Road—A Mystery of Rubies—The Thrush.	
APRIL	82
I. Sunday Morning—The Black Sheep—A Song in the Wood.	
II. Rain and Shine—The Wryneck—Bees and Primroses.	
III. Fulfilment—The Martins—The First Cuckoo—Bluebells—Swallows and Nightingales.	
IV. April on Windle Hill—Downland Larks.	
MAY	104
I. Busy Times—The Forge—Two Ancient Families—The Sweetstuff Shop—Silent Company—The Three Thatchers.	
II. The Long Back-Reach—In the Willow Bower—A New Song and an Old Story.	
III. Whitsunday—God's House Beautiful—The Soul-Shepherd.	
IV. Ringing the Bees—An old-fashioned Bee-Garden.	
V. Corpus Christi : an Impression.	
JUNE	132
I. The Old Brier-Bush—Chaffinch and Willow-Wren—The Mowing-Grass—The First Wild Rose.	
II. The Sheep-Wash.	

CONTENTS

vii

PAGE

III. Rainy Days—Old Times and New—The Reverend's Garden—Darkie and his Den.	
IV. The Cottar's Saturday Night—The Cricket Committee—Summer Gloaming.	
JULY	161
I. Summertime—The Teasel Trap—Bees in the Tares—Poppies and Wheat—The Oat-field—Swifts.	
II. The Cricket Match.	
III. Time and the Town—The Beginning of Harvest—Sport and Nature—In the Seed-hay—The Storm.	
AUGUST	189
I. The Tea-Garden—In Search of Change—The Trippers—A Mysterious Company.	
II. The South-west Wind—Talk on the Downs—In the Combe—A Reconciliation.	
III. Travellers' Tales.	
SEPTEMBER	210
I. Odd Men out—The Little Tobacconist—A Talk by the River.	
II. The Waning Summer—Threshing.	
III. Two Old Maids—The Minstrels.	
IV. Autumn Dawn—The Cub Hunt—Thistle-down.	
OCTOBER	234
I. The Going of the Martins—Spider-Webs.	
II. A Legacy—The Caravan.	
III. Gossamer—The Berry Harvest—Autumn Changes—The Brown Owl—Glowworms—Birds that Pass in the Night.	

	PAGE
NOVEMBER	257
I. The Colours of Autumn—The Ivy Bloom— The Two Painters—A November Nosegay.	
II. Night in the Village—Tom Clemmer—Dinner at the Farm.	
III. Winter at Last—Capitulation.	
DECEMBER	283
I. Gloom and Shine.	
II. House-Bound—A Happy Village.	
III. A Voyage down the Street—The Beef Club Drawing.	
IV. The Christmas-Tree—Voices in the Night.	

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

HOMeward BOUND	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	FACING PAGE
OLD FRIENDS	28
SPRINGTIME	48
THE RINDERS	80
THE BEE-MASTER	122
THE SHEEP-WASH	146
SOUTHDOWN EWES	200
THE FERRYMAN'S COTTAGE	280

INTRODUCTION

IF you love the quiet of the country—the real quiet which is not silence at all, but the blending of a myriad scarce-perceptible sounds—you will get it in Windlecombe, heaped measure, pressed down, and running over, year in and year out.

The village lies just where Arun river breaks the green rampart of the Sussex Downs. To the west, the lowest cottages dwindle almost to the water's brink. Northward and eastward, the highest buildings stand afar off, clear cut against the blue wall of the sky; while in between, filling the deep, steep combe, church and inn and every kind of dwelling-house, little or big, huddle together under their thatch and old red tiles, with the village green in their midst, and a thread of white road rippling through them all and up the steep combe-side till it is lost in the sunny waste of the hills.

But there is no way through Windlecombe. From the market town four miles off, the road

is good enough ; and good it remains until it reaches the highest human outpost of the village. But there it suddenly changes to a mere cart-track, soon to vanish altogether in the green sward of the Down. And therein lies Windlecombe's chiefest blessing. Far away on the great main road, when the wind is southerly, we can hear the motor-bugles calling, and see pale comet-beams careering through the night. But these things come no nearer. At rare intervals, perhaps, a stray juggernaut will descend upon us, and demand of some placid rustic the nearest way to Land's End or Aberdeen, returning disgusted on its tracks when it learns that there is only one road from here to anywhere, and that the road it came. But these ear-splitting, malodorous happenings are few and far between. At all other times, Windlecombe wears the quiet of the hills about it like a garment. The dust of the highway has no soaring ambition to whiten the hedgerows, or fill the cottagers' cabbages with grit. It still keeps to its ancient, lowly work of smoothing the path for man and beast ; and our children can play in it unterrorised, our old dogs lie in it at their slumberous ease.

How wild and quiet the place is, you can only realise by living in it from year's end to year's

end, as has been my own privilege for longer than I care to compute. For how many ages a human settlement has existed in this wooded, sun-flooded cleft of the Downs, it is impossible to hazard a guess. Windlecombe is mentioned in *Domesday*, but the stones of the old church proclaim it as belonging to times more distant still. Be that as it may, its clustered roofs and grey church tower have long been reckoned in the traditions of wild life as part and parcel of the eternal hills. Birds frequent Windlecombe as they haunt the beech-woods that hang upon the sides of the combe. They use the rick-yards and gardens, the very streets even, as they use the glades in the woodlands or the verges of the brooks. You may come out of a winter's morning and see a heron flapping slowly out of your paddock, or listen to a pheasant's trumpeting on the other side of the hedge. And in early summer you can sit on the garden bench, and, looking up into the dim elm labyrinth overhead, watch a green woodpecker at work, cutting the hole for his nest straight and true into the heart of the wood. That the thrushes sing all day long from Michaelmas to Midsummer Day, that in June you cannot sleep for the nightingales, that there is never an hour of daylight all the year round when a lark

is not carolling against the blue or stormy grey above the village—these things you take as part of your rightful daily fare, and are content.

But life in an English village derives its charm only in part from its intimacy with wild Nature and all her wonders and beauties, indispensable as these are to the daily lives of most thinking, working men. There is no error so disastrous, humanly speaking, as that which leads a man to seek happiness or sublimity out of the beaten track of his fellows. Neighbourhood, the daily interchange of thought and word and kindly deed, is a necessity for all healthy human life, and the natural medium of all true advancement. And nowhere will you find it of such sturdy growth, rooted in such nourishing, yet temperate soil, than in the villages of modern England.

Yet here it is necessary to discriminate, to mark conditions. If one's duty towards one's neighbour assumes a real and prime world's importance in village life, it is equally true that all men are not alike fit to be villagers, nor all villages to be accounted neighbourly. It is an essential part of the life I would describe in these pages that both the people and the place should depend for existence on the day's work ; work done, as far as may be, on the soil from which all

sprang, and to which all some day must return. The show villages, the little lodging-letting communities that are to be found here and there, must be excluded from the argument. Nor can men of private means, however modest, find a natural place in the true villager ranks. Where to all men life is a series of laborious days, tired evenings, dreamless nights, you, lolling in the sunshine, or playing at work, or more fatal still, working at play, will be for ever a public anomaly. You will get civility, a patient, dignified tolerance from all. But you will not have a neighbour : though you live until your feet have graven their mark into every stone of the place, you will be a stranger in a strange land.

For my part, such as my work is, I have done it, every stroke, in Windlecombe for half a lifetime back, and may claim to have fairly won my villagers'hip. And what it is worth to me—how it is sweetened by daily touch of kind hearts and grip of clean hands ; what the country sunshine means, filtering through the vine-leaves of my workroom window ; and what the song of the robin that sits on the ivied gate-post without, or, in winter-time, comes fluttering and tapping at the old bull's-eye panes for crumbs ; how the daily walk, in wood or meadow or by riverside,

brings ever its new marvel or revelation of unimagined beauty ; and how, above all, the lives of the quaint, courageous, clever folk, in whose midst Destiny has thrown me, overbrim with all traits human, delectably mortal, divinely out-of-place—these, and many other aspects of villager-ship, I have here tried to set down in plain words and meaning, believing that what has proved of interest and profit to one very human, always erring, often doubting soul, may do the like for others, though journeying by widely sundered tracks.

T. E.

NEIGHBOURHOOD

JANUARY

I

I HAVE just been to the house-door, to take a look at the winter's night. A change is coming, the long frost nears its end—so the old ferryman has told me every morning for a fortnight back, and his perseverance as a prophet has been rewarded at last. As I flung the heavy oak door back, a breath of air struck upon my face warm, it seemed, as summer. All about me in the grey darkness there was an indescribable stir and awakening of life. The moon no longer stared down out of the black sky, a wicked, venomous-bright beauty on her full-fed, rather supercilious face: now she wore a scarf of mist upon her brows, and looked nun-like, dim-eyed, and mild. The stars had lost their cruel glitter. I stepped forth, and felt the grass yield beneath my tread—the first time for near a month past. And as I stood wondering and rejoicing at it all, some night-bird lanced by overhead, a note of the same relief and gladness unmistakable in its shrill, jangling cry.

A

Hard weather in the country has a thousand enjoyments and interests for those who care to look for them ; but when the frost holds relentlessly week after week, as it has done this January, the grimmer side of things comes obtrusively to the fore. There is too much shadow for the light. It is as though you rejoiced in the beauty of sunset beams on a wall, and it were the wall of a torture-house. You lie awake at night, and in the death-quiet stillness, hear the measured footfall of death—a dull, reiterated thud on the frozen ground beneath the holly-hedge, each sound denoting that yet another roosting thrush or starling has given up the unequal fight. Roaming through the lanes in your warm overcoat and thick-soled boots, you note the loveliness of the hoar-frost, at one step dazzling white, and at the next aglow with prismatic colour ; and turning the corner, you come upon the gipsy's tent, and realise that, while you lay snug and warm, nothing but that pitiful screen of old rent rags has stood between human beings and the terror of a winter's night.

On one of the hardest days I met the old vicar of Windlecombe, and regaled him with the story of how I had just passed along the river-way as the tide was falling ; how, at full flood, at the pause of the waters, the frost had sheathed the river with ice ; and how, when the tide began

to go down, this crystal stratum had remained aloft, held up by the myriad reed-stems ; until at length, loosened by the sunbeams, it had fallen sheet by sheet to the wildest, most ravishing music, each icy tympanum, as it fell, ringing a different, clear, sweet note. And, in return for my word-picturing, the old man gave me a story of the same times to match it ; how he had just learnt that certain ill-clad, ill-fed children—whom the law compelled to tramp every morning from Redesdown, a little farming hamlet miles away over the frozen hills, to the nearest school at Windlecombe, and tramp back again every night—were given a daily penny between the three of them for their midday meal ; and how, as often as not, the bread they needed went unbought from the village store, because of the lure of the intervening sweetstuff shop. Later, in the red light of sundown, I met those children going home, as I had often met them, plodding one behind the other, heads down to the bitter blast. Each wore a great new woollen muffler, and had his pockets stuffed. I knew who had cared for them, and my heart smote me. Somehow the pure austerity of the evening—the radiant light ahead, the white grace of the hills about me, the star-gemmed azure above—no longer brought the old elation. The jingle of my skates, as they hung from my arm, took on a

disagreeable sound of fetters. Though I carried them many a time after that, I never put them away without the honest wish that I should use them no more.

But luckily, these long spells of unremitting frost are rare in our country. Ordinary give-and-take winter's weather—the alternation of cold and warmth, gloom and sunshine, wind and calm—brings little hardship to any living thing. Country children have a wonderful way of thriving and being happy, even though their diet is mainly bread-and-dripping and separated milk. As for wild life, we need expend no commiseration on any creature that can burrow ; and while there are berries in the hedgerows, and water in the brooks, no bird will come to harm.

It is curious to see how Nature ekes out her winter supplies, doling out rations, as it were, from day to day. If the whole berry harvest came to ripe maturity at the same season, or were of like attractiveness, it would be squandered and exhausted by the spendthrift, happy-go-lucky hordes of birds, long before the winter was through. But many things are designed to prevent this. Under the threat of starvation, all birds will eat berries ; but a great proportion of them will do so only as a last resource. At first it is the hawthorn fruit that goes. The soft flesh of the may-berry will yield to the weakest

bill, and the whole crop ripens together in early winter. But even here Nature provides against the risk of immediate waste, that will mean starvation hereafter. The missel-thrushes have been given a bad name because each of them takes possession of some well-loaded stretch of hedgerow, and spends the whole day in driving off other birds. Yet, on this habit of the greedy missel, depends not only his own future sustenance but that of all the rest. For all his agility, he cannot prevent each bird snatching at least enough to keep life going, and while he is so busy, he has himself no chance for gluttony.

Other berry supplies, such as the privet and holly, seem to be preserved to the last because they are universally distasteful, though nourishing at a pinch. But it is the hips, or rose-berries, which provide the best example of Nature's way of conserving the lives of birds throughout hard weather against their own foolish, squandering instinct. These berries do not ripen all at once, whether late or early in the season. On every bush, the scarlet hips soften in regular, long-drawn-out succession, some being ready in early winter, and some not until well on in the new year. When the hip is ripe, the tenderest beak can get at its viscid fruit ; but until it begins to soften, there is hardly a bird that can deal with it. The rose-berries, with their scanty but never-failing

stores, are really the mainstay of all in hard times. It is doubtful, indeed, whether the birds that die wholesale in prolonged frosty weather, are killed by hunger at all. Probably their death is due rather to thirst. So long as the brooks run, bird life can hold against the bitterest times. But once silence has settled down over the country-side—the only real silence of the year, when all the streams are locked up at their source—then begins the steady footfall under the holly-hedge, and you must needs turn from the crimson sunset light upon the wall.

I have shut the heavy old house-door, and got back to my table by the workroom fire. The thaw has come in earnest now. I can hear the drip of the melting rime in the garden, far and near. The warm west wind is beginning to sigh down the chimney. The logs simmer and glow, but not with the greedy brightness of frost-bound nights.

It is on these long winter evenings that Solitude comes into her kingdom. Men are not all made alike, nor is solitude with all a voluntary condition, at least a self-imposed necessity, as it is with me—a something that I must fashion out of my own will and abnegation, weave about me as the tunnel-spider weaves her lair. In this ancient house the walls are thick, yet not so thick but that an ear-strain will just trip the echo of

far-off laughter. If I but drew that curtain and set the door ajar, I could catch a murmur of voices like the sound of bee-hives in summer dark; and a dozen strides along the stone-flagged passage would yield me what I may not take for hours to come—tried and meet companionship, the flint-and-steel play of bandied jest, my own to hold, if I can, in brisk exchange of nerving, heartening thought. But these things in their season. Mine now it is to dip the grey goose-quill, to gird up for the long tramp over the foolscap-country before me—that trackless white desert where I must lay a trail to be followed, whether by many or few or none, or with what pleasure or weariness, I may never certainly know. For the writer is like a sower, that is ever sowing and passing on. He can seldom do more than take a hurried, fleeting shoulder-glimpse at the harvest behind him, nor see who reaps, if haply it be reaped at all.

Scratching away in the cosy fireside quiet of the old room, there comes to me at length a sound from the chimney-corner, to which I must needs listen, no matter what twist or quirk of syntax holds me in thrall. You often hear aged country folk complain that the crickets no longer sing on the hearth, as they used to do in their childhood. My own crickets have always seemed to sing blithely enough, too blithely at times to

help one forward with a difficult task. But I had always been glad to accept the statement as one more proof of the decadence of modern times. Hobnobbing one winter's evening, however, with the old ferryman in his riverside den, and noting how merrily the crickets were chirping in his chimney-corner, I wondered to hear him give way to this same lament. Then, for the first time, I realised that not the crickets, but his old ears, were at fault. Though the little smoke-blackened cabin rang with their music, the old man, who would, on the loudest night, have heard a ferry-call from the other side of the water instantly, failed now to grip the high-pitched sound. And this set me to philosophising. When the crickets cease to pipe in my own chimney-corner, then, and not till then, I will admit I am growing old.

But though we speak of the chirp or pipe of the cricket and grasshopper, it is well to remember that neither these, nor any other insects, possess a true voice. It would be nearer the fact to call the cricket a fiddler than a piper. For it is by sitting and drawing the corrugated rib of his wing-case to and fro over the sharp edge of the wing beneath, that his shrill note is developed. And it is only the male cricket who can chirp. The female carries upon her no trace of any fiddling contrivance. When all things

were made, and made in couples, on the females of at least one numerous species, it is pleasant to remark, a significant and commendable silence was imposed.

Solitude by a fireside in an old country dwelling, the murmurous night without, and, within, the steady clear glow of candles made by your own hands out of wax from your own hives, it would be strange if the evening's work failed to get itself done cleverly and betimes. Pleasant as it is to all penmen to be achieving, there is no depth of satisfaction like that of leaving off. Then, not to return incontinently to the sober, colour-fast world of fact, but to stay in your dream-country, idling awhile by the roadside, is one of the great compensations of this most exacting of lives.

Your tale is done. You have scrawled 'The End' at the bottom of the sheet, and thrown it with the others. You have turned your chair to the fire, put up your slippered feet on the andiron, and have filled your most comfortable pipe. The end it is, in very truth, for all who will read the tale; but for you there will never be an end, just as there never was a beginning to it. Unbidden now, and not to be gainsaid even if you had the mind, your dream-children live on in the town or country nook you made for them; live on, increase and multiply, finish their peck of dirt, add to the world's store either of folly or sanctity,

come to their graves at last, each by his own inexorable road, and each leaving the seed of another tale behind.

To the enviable reader, when, after much water-spilling and cracking of crowns, Jack has got his Jill, and the wedding-bells are lin-lan-loning behind the dropt curtain, there is the satisfaction of certainty that so much love, and one pair of hearts at least, are safe from further chance and change in the whirligig of life. But to the teller of the tale, there is no such assurance. Just as his dream-children came out of an immortality he did not devise, so will they persist through an eternity not of his controlling; and for ever they will be subject to the same odds of bliss or disaster as any stranger that may pass his door. Yet, being only human, he will nevertheless go on with his tales in the secret hope that Jove may be caught napping, and a little heaven be brought down to earth before its allotted time. For living in a world of law and order—where even Omnipotence may not deny to every cause its outcome—is too realistically like camping under fire. The old fatalists had peace of mind because they believed it availed nothing to crouch when the bullets screamed overhead, nor even to dodge a spent shot. But to take one's stand in the face of the myriad cross-purposes and side-issues of an orderly universe, needs a vastly

different temper. Perhaps it is just the secret longing in all hearts to have at least a little make-believe of certitude—if nowhere else but in the pages of a story—by which the art of fiction so hugely thrives.

I have put out the candles, each shining under its little red umbrella of paper, the better to see the joyous colour of the fire. When drab thoughts come—those night-birds of sombre feather—the pure untinged glow from well-kindled logs has a wonderful way of setting them to flight. Let unassailable optimism make his fire of coals : for him of questioning, craving, often craven heart, there is no warmth like that from seasoned timber. Coals, with their dynamic energy, their superfluity of smoke, their sudden incongruous jets of flame, seem to be for ever insisting on facts you would fain forget a while, much as you may admire them and depend on them—the progress and competition of outer life. But wood fires serve to draw the mind away from modernism in all its phases. So that you burn the right kind of wood, and this is important, your fireside thoughts need never leave the realm of cheery retrospect. Good, seasoned logs of beech or ash are the best. Oak has no half moods ; it must make either a furnace unapproachable, or smoulder away in dead, dull embers. Elm gives poor comfort, and the slightest damp appals it.

Poplar is charity-fuel ; burn it will, indeed, to good purpose, but too explosively. There is no rest by a fire of poplar : one must be for ever treading out or parrying the vagrant sparks.

A joyous colour it is—the wavering amber light that fills the old room now from the piled-up beechen logs ; joyous, yet having a sedate, ruminative tinge about it, like old travellers' tales of ancient times. Nor does the colour appeal only to the eye : there seems to be a fragrance in it. That this is no mere conceit but simple fact, I was strangely reminded when I blew the candles out, and from the smouldering wicks two long white ribbons of vapour were borne away on the draught. The fragrance of the smoking wax brought up a picture of the summer nights when the bees lay close to fashion it. Round about the cluster in the pent-up hive were thousands of little vats of brewing honey, each giving off a steam that was the life-spirit of clover-fields and blue borage, and sainfoin which spreads the hills with rose-red light. All these mingled scents had got into the nature of the wax, and now they were given off again in sweet-smelling vapour, such a fragrance as you may rarely chance upon in certain foreign churches, where the old ordinances yet prevail, and the candles are still made from the pure product of the hives.

And it is the same with burning logs. Each

kind of wood has its own essential odour, which pervades the room as though it were soul and body with the light. You cannot separate the two ; no riding down of fancy will dissociate the flickering gipsy-gold of the embers and the perfume of the simmering bark. If these do not fill your mind with memories of the green twilight of woodlands, of hours spent in leafy shadows of forest-glades, then—then you are not made for a country fireside, and were happier hobnobbing with Modernity by his sooty, coal-fed hearth.

II

It is not difficult to understand why indoor work is at most times tolerable in cities, fair weather or foul. For in cities earth and sky have long been driven out of their ancient comradeship. Stifled by pavements and masonry, the earth cannot feel the touch of the sunbeams, nor the air enrich itself with the breath of the soil. The old glad interchange is prevented at all points. There is no lure in the sunshine, no siren voice in the gale. Summer rain does not call you out into the open, to share the joy of it with the drinking grass and leaves. Amidst your dead, impenetrable bricks-and-mortar, you can plod on with your scribbling or figuring without a heart-stir ; no vine-leaf will tap at

your window, no lily-of-the-field taunt your industry, nor song of skylark dissipate your dreams.

But indoor work, carried on in a village deep in the green heart of some beautiful country-side, is on an entirely different plane. At times, perhaps, it becomes the hardest work in the world. With one lavish hand life gives you the things most necessary for close, unremitting application, and with the other she ruthlessly sets all manner of obstacles in your path. On such a day as now dawned crystal-clear over Windlecombe, with the first warm wind of the year blowing new life into everything, there was no stopping indoors for me. I got down to my work punctually enough, even a little before the wonted time. But good resolutions could make no headway against such odds. The south-west wind boomed merrily in the elm-tops. The sunbeams riddled my old house through and through. Out in the garden robins and thrushes had formed themselves into a grand orchestra; and when the breeze lulled for a moment, I could hear the larks singing far overhead, as though it were a summer's day. An hour of half-hearted tinkering saw my fortitude break like a milldam. Five minutes later I had shut the house-door behind me, and was off up the village street, gulping down deep draughts of the sweet morning air.

I chose the path that led to the Downs.

Mounting the steep, chalky track in the arms of the gale, with the misty green heights looming up before me against the blue of the winter's morning, one fact was borne in upon me at every step. Though I must needs write winter—for January was but three parts done—it was no longer winter, but spring. A few days' sunny warmth had worked what seemed like a miracle. In the hedges and trees the buds were swelling. Birds were pairing. Young green spears of grass showed underfoot. Across the path clouds of midges danced in the sunshine. I heard the first low love-croon of a wood-dove; and, when I stopped for breath in the lee of the hazel-copse, there drifted out upon me a song never yet heard on winter days—the mellow voice of a blackbird calling for a mate.

But the more we study Nature out of doors, the more we come to disbelieve in winter altogether. Winter is in truth a myth. From the moment the old year's leaves are down, the earth is in vigorous preparation for the new year's life and growth. Nature lies by quietly enough during the cold spells, but each awakening is a stronger and more joyous one. While they last, the long frosts seem to hold all the life of things suspended. Yet, with every return of the south-west wind, it is easy to see that this is not really so. Though the visible sunbeams have had no power

for progress, those stored in the earth have been slowly and steadily at work. And when the thaw comes, Nature seems to take up the slack of the year in one tremendous forward pull.

I reached the crest of Windle Down, and made over the springy, dew-soaked grass, content to go wheresoever the tearing wind should drive me. The long, billowing curves of the hills stretched away on all sides until they lost themselves in distant violet haze. Here and there flocks of sheep made a grey patch in the sunlit solitude, and a low clamour of bells was in the air blent with the unending song of the larks. On the combe-sides the gorse spread its darker green, and, near at hand, I could make out its gold buds already bursting under the touch of the sunbeams. The next hill before me was topped with a ring of fencing, near which stood a solitary figure, clear cut against the tender blue of the north.

Shepherding on the South Downs is an hereditary family calling, and old George Artlett, the shepherd at Windlecombe farm, had trained up two at least of his four sons to follow in his own tranquil steps. In village life, though the essence of neighbourliness is that it must be exercised impartially to one and all, worthy or unworthy, there are ever some about you with whom the daily traffic of genial word and deed comes more

aptly than with the rest. In all the years I had known the Artletts, there had been scarce a day when I had not encountered one or other of that sturdy clan, and generally to my profit. If it was not the old shepherd himself placidly trailing along in the rear of his flock with his shining crook, it was 'young' George, the fifty-year-old under-shepherd, his pocket bulged out with a Bible; or Dewie, the shepherd's boy; or John, the sporting handy-man, tramping off to covert with his pack of mongrels; or quaint 'Mistus' Artlett, carrying her household basket to and from the shop. Of Tom Artlett—the 'Singing Ploughman,' as he was called in the neighbouring market town—I got a glimpse sometimes in the early grey of morning, or more often of late afternoon, as he journeyed between home and farm. He ploughed his acre a day conscientiously, walking the usual twelve miles in the doing of it; and all the while his rich, powerful voice made the hills about him echo with the songs he loved.

Why he sang these songs, and why young George's pocket always bulged, would have been at once evident to you if you could have looked out of window with me any Sunday morning about eight of the clock. Punctually at that hour, the two brothers strode by in their scarlet guernseys and blue, braided coats, on their way

to the town ; and there they passed a seventh day more toilsome than all the other six, coming home at nightfall hoarse and weary, yet plainly as happy as any men could be.

Young George Artlett stood on the hill-top, leaning upon his crook. The wind fluttered his coat about him, and lashed his haversack to and fro. He stood with his back in my direction, bare-headed, his grey hair streaming in the breeze. It was not until I had almost come up with him that I marked his uplifted face, his closed eyes, his moving lips ; and then I stopped irresolutely, ashamed of the blunder I had committed. But before I could turn and retreat, the dog at his side had signalled my presence. The old tarpaulin sou'wester hat was returned to its place. Young George wheeled round, and looked at me with eyes of welcome.

' I knowed by th' bark o' him, who 'twur,' he said, in his slow, deep, quiet voice. ' Rowster, 'a has a name fer all o' ye. That there little happy shruck, 'tis yerself an' nane other. When 'a perks up an' bellers, 'tis th' poodle-dorg an' Miss Sweet. An' when 'a grizzles, I an't no call to look around ; there be a black coat no gurt ways off, sure as big apples comes from little uns.'

He smiled to himself, as though the memory of some recent encounter with the black coat had

returned to him. Then he took a quick glance at the sun.

'Drinkin'-time!' said he.

His sheep were all on the far hill-side, half a mile off perhaps, feeding—as sheep always do on windy days—with their heads to the breeze; and shouldering together in long, straight lines, roughly parallel—as, again, sheep generally will, in spite of the prettily ordered groups on painters' canvases. It is only on days of perfect calm that grazing sheep will head to all points of the compass, and on the South Downs such days are rare indeed.

George Artlett put his hands to his mouth funnel-wise, and sent the shepherd's folding-call ringing on the breeze.

'Coo-oo-oo-o-up! Coo-oo-oo-o-up! Coom along—coo-oo-up!'

The shrill, wild notes pealed out, drawing an echo from every hill far and near. At once all the ewes on the distant sunny slope stopped their nibbling, and looked round. Again the cry rang forth. This time the foremost sheep moved a step or two in our direction, hesitated, then came slowly on. A moment later the whole flock was under way, pouring steadily up the hill-side and filling the air with a deep, clamorous song.

But two or three of the younger sheep had stayed behind in a little bay of grass beyond the

furze-brake. Rowster looked inquiringly at his master, got a consenting wave of the arm, and was off with the speed of light. We watched him as he raced down the hill in a wide semicircle, and, taking the malingerers in the rear, drove them helter-skelter after the rest. Yelping and snapping behind them, he brought the whole flock up to the dew-pond at what seemed an entirely unnecessary pace.

' 'Tis allers so wi' dorgs,' observed young George reflectively. 'Ye can never larn them as shepherd work ought to go slow as the sun i' the sky. All fer hurry an' bustle they be, from birth-time to buryin'—get the hour by, sez they, the day over, life done, an' on wi' the next thing!'

We turned our shoulders to the blustering wind, and leant over the rail together, watching the sheep drink. These dew-ponds on the Sussex Downs are always a mystery to strangers coming for the first time into the sheep country; and they are never quite bereft of their miraculous quality, even among the shepherds themselves. That in a land, where there are neither springs nor natural pools of water, man should dig hollows, not in the lowest sink-points of the valleys where one would reasonably make such a work, but on the summits of the highest hills, and then confidently expect Nature to fill them with water, keeping them so filled year after

year, in and out of season, no matter what call was made on their resources—must appear little else than downright ineptitude to one who has never had the feasibility of the plan demonstrated under his very eyes. Yet the seeming wonder of the dew-pond has a very simple explanation. It is nothing more than a cold spot on the earth, which continually precipitates the moisture from the air passing over it; and this cold spot is formed on the hill-top because there it encounters air which has not been robbed of its vapour by previous contact with the earth.

The best dew-pan makers are the men of Wiltshire, as all flockmasters know. The pond, having been excavated to the right depth and shape, is lined first with puddled clay or chalk, then with a thick layer of dry straw; finally, upon this straw a further substantial coating of clay is laid, and well beaten down. Nothing is needed then but to bring a few cart-loads of water to start the pond, and to set a ring-fence about it to keep off heavy stock. The action of the straw, in its waterproof double-casing, is to intercept the heat-radiation of the earth at that particular point, so that the pond-cavity and its contents remain colder than the surrounding soil.

How the dew-pond came to be invented has often been the subject of wondering speculation. No doubt there have been dew-pond makers for

untold centuries back, but at one time, however far distant, a first discovery of the principle underlying the thing must have been made. Probably the dew-pond, in some form or other, had its origin in those remote times when all the high-lying chalk-lands of southern England were overrun by a dense population. But then, as now, the region must have been waterless ; and the people, living there for security's sake, must, nevertheless, have been constrained to provide themselves with this first daily necessity of all life. We read of the manna given in the Wilderness, and the water struck from the Rock. These were miracles worked, as miracles ever are, for children : they were grown men, evidently, in mind and heart, to whom the dew-pond was given. For though the thing, in essence, was set to shine about their feet wherever men trod, so that none could forbear seeing, its adaptation to human need was left to man's own labour and thoughtful ingenuity. To-day, as in those far-off ages, the dwarf plume-thistle studs the sward of the Downs, each circle of thick, fleshy leaves, matted together and centrally depressed, forming a perfect little dew-pond, that retains its garnered moisture long after all other vegetation has grown dry in the heat of the mounting sun. Even if there were no such thing as a dew-pond on all the Downs to-day, and every flock must perforce be

driven miles, perhaps, down into the valley to be watered, it is inconceivable that no one of prime intelligence, wandering the hills alive to the need of the thirsty thousands around him, would mark the natural reservoirs of the thistles, reason out the principles they embodied, and straightway set brain and hand to work on the first dew-pond—using perchance, in earliest experiment, the actual thistle-leaves for the indispensable heat-retarding layer.

I had often talked the matter over with George Artlett, and now we drifted into the old subject. But he was never to be cajoled out of his belief in the miraculous nature of the affair.

'Him as sent th' fire down to th' could altar,' he said, his long arm going up to heaven, and his voice taking on that deep, vibratory chime so familiar to Sunday loiterers in Stavisham market-place, 'He knaws how to send watter to faith an' a dry pan. Ay! but I ha' seed it comin', many's the time. An' th' first time, I 'lowed as 'twur High Barn ricks burnin'. We was goin' hoame to fold, and there afore me, right agen th' red night-sky, I seed a gurt topplin' cloud o' summut as looked like smoke ahent th' hill. Sez I, 'tis High Barn ricks afire! But it warn't. It wur jest Gorramighty gatherin' together His dew from the fower winds o' heaven, an' pourin' it into Maast' Coles's pond.'

III

One afternoon, when the month was all but at its end, I came home through the riverside meadows. The sun had just dipped below the misty earth-line. Before me, in the east, the darkness was spreading up the sky, and the larger stars already shone with something of their nightly lustre. But behind me it was still day. From the horizon upward, and far overhead, the sky was a pale, luminous turquoise, overflecked with cloud of fiery amber—the two colours a perfect harmony of cold and heat. As I trod the narrow field-path, facing the dusk, with all that glorious enmity reconciled at my back, I became aware of a mysterious sound somewhere in the chain of tree-girt meadows on ahead. A missel-thrush had been singing hard by, but now his clarion had ceased, and this other far-away note forced me suddenly out of my musing. It was not a single song, but a deep, continuous outpouring, a medley of music like the splashing and tumbling of mountain brooks. With every step forward it grew in volume. At last, in a belt of elm-trees that bordered one of the farthest fields, I came upon the cause of it; and though I had many times seen vast congregations of starlings, I had never before encountered so huge a company as now met my gaze.

The trees stretched across the entire field, and every twig on every branch had its perching songster, the combined effect being as though the trees had suddenly shot out a magic foliage, coal-black against the deepening blue of the sky, heavy and thick as leaves in June. Now the mountain brooks had swollen to Niagaras. The hubbub was literally deafening. I shouted my loudest, hoping to set the gargantuan host to flight, but I could scarce hear my own voice. For a full ten minutes I stood in that great flood-tide of melody, and all the time fresh detachments of birds were continually arriving to swell the multitude, and add their voices to the chorus. At length I saw two birds break away from the mass, and fly straight off side by side. Immediately the tumult ceased, and there followed a sound like the long, rumbling roll of thunder. The whole concourse had taken wing together, the tree-tops, released from their weight, lashing back as though struck by a flaw of wind. Now the army swept over my head, darkening the sky as it went. The thunderous sound grew less and less as the flock made for the distant woods. A moment more, and an uncanny silence had fallen on everything. Then, half a mile away in the misty dark, I heard the rich, wild voice peal out again, where the starling host had taken up their quarters for the night.

Thus it happened every evening for a week after, when they passed on out of the district and I saw them no more. Probably no single stretch of country could support such incredible numbers for more than a few days together, and they must be for ever trekking onward, leaving behind them a famine-stricken land, and making life all the harder for our own native birds. For there is little doubt that these vast hordes of starlings that sweep the country-side in winter, are foreigners in the main.

FEBRUARY

I

FROM where my old house stands, behind its double row of lindens at the top of the green, you can see well-nigh all that is happening in Windlecombe. Sitting at the writing-table in the great bay-window, you get an uninterrupted view down the length of the village street. From the windows right and left—through a trellis of bare branches in winter, and, in summer, through gaps in the greenery—you overlook the side-alleys where dwell the less profoundly respectable, the more free-and-easy, of Windlecombe folk. And in the rear, beyond my garden and little orchard, there is the farm—rickyard and barn and dwelling-house all crowded together on the green hill-side bestrewn with grazing cattle, cocks and hens innumerable, all of the snow-white breed, gobbling turkeys, and guinea-fowl that cry ‘Come back, come back!’ every waking moment of their lives.

All the oldest houses in Windlecombe are gathered round the village green. Here, amidst

its thicket of live-oak and yew, the church tower rears its bluff grey stones against the sky, its clock-face with the one gilded hour-hand (minutes are of no account in Windlecombe) turned to catch the last light of evening. The parsonage, the village shop, the forge and wheelwright's yard, a dozen or more of ivy-smothered tenements, stand at easy intervals round the oblong of the green. There is the little sweetstuff shop at the far corner, side by side with the cobbler's den; and, beyond them, the inn juts boldly out half across the roadway, silhouetting its sign against the distant, bright patch of river which flows at the foot of the hill.

I often wonder how other villages get on without a green. In Windlecombe all the life of the place seems to culminate here. On summer evenings every one drifts this way at some time or other for a quiet stroll, or a chat with friends on the seats under the 'Seven Sisters,' a group of gnarled Scotch pines almost in the centre of the green. Even in winter I seldom look forth and see it entirely deserted. Except in school-hours, there are always children playing upon it, and the old men, whose work in the fields is done, hold here daily a sort of informal club whenever the sun shines. But the old women I never see. All their lives long, their activities and interests have been centred in the home, and now they



OLD FRIENDS

spend the dusk of their days consistently by the firesides. On week-days, the fairest summer weather has no power to tempt them abroad. Up to seventy or so, they can be seen creeping over the green towards the church on Sunday mornings; but it is duty, not desire, that has drawn them from their burrows. For the rest of the week they sit, most of them, stitching tiny scraps of silk and cotton together. It seems to be an indispensable condition of future bliss with all the old women in Sussex, that each should finish a patchwork quilt before she dies.

There comes a morning in the year, generally in early February, when the fact that the days are getting longer is suddenly driven in upon your consciousness, as though the change had come about in a single night at the touch of some magician's wand.

A long spell of gloomy weather ends in a crisp, bright dawn. Through the chinks in the blind, the sun casts quivering spots of gold upon the wall. You wake from your dreams, and immediately know that life has become a different thing from that of yesterday. Throwing the casements back, there comes in upon you a flood of new light, new air, new melody. It is barely eight o'clock, and already the sun is high over Windle hill. The thrushes have given up their winter piping, and have begun to sing in the old

glad way, linking half a dozen sweet notes in a phrase together, and pouring it out over and over again. The air has the savour of warm earth in it, the scent of green growth ; and, looking down at the flower-borders in the garden, you see sheaves of snowdrops breaking up through the soil, and the first crocuses yielding their treasure to the first bees.

To-day, though it was only the first of February, just such another morning startled me from sleep, and sent me out of doors tingling to the finger-tips with this new spirit of wonder at a changed order of things. Over Windlecombe, in the level sunlight, half a hundred violet plumes of smoke rose into the calm air. From the smithy came the steady chime of Tom Clemmer's anvil. The pit-saw was droning in the wheelwright's yard. Up at High Barn they were threshing wheat, and the sound might have been that from a great cathedral organ, so far off that nothing but the deep tones of the pedal-pipes could reach the ear. But though all these sounds denoted humanity astir, and busy at the day's task, to the eye there was no sign of any one abroad. I was as much alone as Crusoe on his island, and just as free to wander where I would.

I skirted the green, and turned in at the church-yard gate. Everywhere between the crowding

stones, the grass was white with dew. Glittering water-bells rimmed every leaf, and trembled at the tip of every twig. The old yew dripped solemnly in its shadowed corner. Down the face of each memorial-stone, tiny runnels coursed like tears.

It was strange to see how the dewdrops obliterated all vestige of natural colour in the grass, and yet lent it a thousand alien hues. As I moved slowly along, sparks of vivid green and crimson, orange and blue, flashed incessantly amidst the frosted silver. Turning my back to the sunshine, all these colours vanished, and the glittering quality of the dew was lost. Now it was just a dead-white field, crossed and re-crossed with lines of emerald where the foraging birds had left their tracks. But all round the head of my shadow, that stretched giant-like before me, there was still a shining circle of light. I remembered to have read somewhere of one of the religious painters in the Middle Age, who accounted himself divinely set apart from his fellows, by reason of a halo which, he said, appeared at certain seasons about him as he walked in the fields. Probably he saw then what I saw this morning; but, being an artist, he won inspiration, new freshets of saintly energy, from what, to the ordinary unemotional sinner, would be no more than an interesting, natural fact.

II

Towards afternoon, quite a little throng of ancient folk gathered on the benches under the Seven Sisters, drawn thither by the sunny mildness of the day. Sauntering about on the green hard by, I could hear the low hum of their voices ; and at last I took a place, almost unobserved, on one of the outer seats a little distance from the group.

Eavesdropping, even in its most innocent form, hardly comes into the category of virtues ; but, in any serious attempt to study country life and character, it must be reckoned almost a necessary vice. I confess, in this respect, not only to having yielded to it as a lifelong, irresistible habit, but to having cultivated it on many occasions as an art. The English peasant under open observation is no more himself than a wild bird in a cage ; and these old folk, in particular, needed as much wary stalking-down as any creature of the woodland. Settled myself quietly now behind a newspaper in the corner, my presence, if it had been marked at all, was soon forgotten ; and the talk began again among the group in the usual desultory, pondering style—talk in the ancient dialect of Sussex, such as you will hear to-day only in the most out-of-the-way villages, and

then only among those with whose passing it also must pass irrevocably away.

Daniel Dray, the old wheelwright, was tapping his stick reflectively on his boot-toe, keeping time with the song of the pit-saw in the neighbouring yard, where young Daniel was mightily at work. By his side sat Tom Clemmer the elder, his bleak grey eyes far away in space. All the rest of the company were studying the horizon in much the same distraught, silent fashion. A very old, but still hearty man, in a wide blue suit, was chipping at a plug of sailor's tobacco with a jack-knife, and smiling to himself. At length the smile developed into a rich chuckle.

'Dan'l,' said he, 'now you ha' spoke a trew wured, if never afore! So they be, Dan'l, so they be! Ay! an' all round the wureld 'tis th' same wi' 'em! Doan't I know?' He made a telling pause at the question, and then—'Not 'aaf!' he added in solemn irony, as he struck a match on his hindermost serge.

The old wheelwright stretched himself luxuriously in the sunshine.

'I knows naun o' Frenchies, an' blackamoors, an' sech-like,' said he. 'But a Sussex maid!—Ah!'

The exclamation, long drawn out, was echoed round the circle. Old Tom Clemmer turned argumentatively in his seat.

' Ay ! real purty, Dan ! l—purty enough ! ' he agreed. ' Ye wur i' luck's way, as I minds well wur said by all th' folk, forebye 'tis so long ago. But, Fegs ! man ! We han't all had your fortun' i' bright eyes ! What sez Maast' Grimble there ? '

A thin high voice quavered out from the end of the bench. For full five minutes it hovered in mid-air, like a long-drawn-out treble note on a violin.

' Ay ! trew, Tom ! Never a wured o' a lee, Tom ! But 'twur nane o' my doin', as many 's th' time I ha' tould ye. Stavisham Fair, 'twur, i' Fifty-three, as I first seed her, all i' sky-blew an' spangles ; wi' th' lights flarin', an' th' drooms bustin', an' th' trumpets blowin' ; an' sech a crowd o' gay folk as never got together afore, i' th' wureld. Wunk, 'a did, at me ; an' I wunk back. Then 'a wunk agen, an' 'twur all ower, neighbours ! We got church-bawled th' follerin' Sunday ; an' hoame I fetched her all within th' month. An' then, Tom, ye knowed how't fell out. Six weeks o' it, we had together ; an' then off 'a goos after 'a's ould carrawan agen, an' I goos fer a souldger. An' nane but th' gurt goodness knows whether I be married man or widderman to-day.'

The faint, shrill voice ceased. A lean, old man, with a chubby face and eyes of so pale a blue, that they seemed almost colourless in the rich,

yellow light of the afternoon, had been intently listening, a trembling hand to each ear. He wore a spotless white round-frock, and was punctiliously, unnaturally clean in all other respects. Now he brought his finger-tips softly together, and stared at the sky in an ecstasy of reminiscence.

'Eighteen thousand happy days,' said he triumphantly, 'agen six weeks o' rough an' tumble — pore George! Ah! well-a-day! But 'tis so, neighbours. Th' Reverend, 'a figured it out fer Jane an' me laast catterning-time. Eighteen thou—— Gorm! but I should ha' lost 'em all, if she hadn't up an' spoke out! I ne'er had no thought on't, trew as th' sun goos round th' sky. But Jane, 'a gie me a red neckercher wan Hock-Monday. Thinks I, "Wat's that fer?" An' then 'a gie me a bag o' pea-nuts, an' sez I to mysel', "'Tis a queer maid surely!" An' then 'a cooms along at harvest-time, an' sez she, "'Enery Dawes, I ha' jist heerd as ould Mistus Fenny 'ull gie up th' malthouse cottage at Milemas, an' seein' as how you warnts me an' I warnts you, 'twould be a pity to lose it; so let's get arsted i' church directly-minute," sez she. Wi' that, 'a putt both arms around th' red neckercher, as I wore; an' gie me wan, two, three—each chop, an' wan i' th' middle. Lor' bless ye! I knowed then what 'a meant, I did! I wur allers

th' sort as could see through a brick wall fur as most folk : never warnted no more 'n an 'int.'

' There agen ! ' said old Tom Clemmer, after a pause. ' Ye wur another o' th' lucky wans, 'Enery. Th' best o' wimmin plunked straight into your eye, in a manner o' speakin'. Ah ! but courtin' days warn't all pea-nuts an' red handkerchers wi' some o' us, 'Enery ! Dear ! oh Lor' ! what trouble I did ha', sureye ! '

He stopped, and sat for a while smiling down into the bowl of his pipe, and shaking his head.

' But ye got her at laast, Tom ! ' said Daniel Dray softly. He stole a commiserate glance round at the other members of the company, and had a silent, meaning nod from each. Old Tom Clemmer blushed, then laughed outright.

' Trew, Dan' ! An' well I reckermembers th' day as 'a first come to Windlecombe—up to th' farm-us yonder, though 'tis forty year ago. All o' a heap, I wur, soon as I sot eyes on her. " Churn-maid ? " sez I to mysel', " 'twunt be long afore y'are summut better'n that, down at th' forge-cottage 'long o' me ! " Come Sunday, I runs agen her on th' litten-path. " Marnin', Mary ! " sez I, an' gies her th' marigolds I 'd picked fer her out o' my own gay-ground ; an' down 'a throws 'em in th' mud, an' off wi'out so much as wured or look. Ah ! a proud, fine maid 'a wur ! —to be sure an' all ! '

Tom Clemmer knocked out his pipe upon his crutch. Then he threw an exultant glance about him.

'What might a man do then, ye'd think? Well, as marigolds warn't no good, I tries laylocks. Not a bit on it! Jerrineums—wuss an' wuss! Roses—never so much as a sniff! Summut useful, thinks I; but they little spring onions as I tied up in a bunch wi' yaller ribbin, an' hung on th' dairy gate fer her, there they hung 'til they was yaller too. Then I has a grand idee. Off I goos to Stavisham, an' buys a gurt big hamber brooch; an' a silver necklace wot weighed down my pocket, carryin' of it; an' a spanglorious goulden weddin'-ring. "Now, my gel, we'll jest see!" sez I all th' way hoame. I bides quiet 'til Sunday, then I hides ahent th' gurt elver-tree, an' pops out upon her suddent-like, as 'a cooms along. I offers her th' brooch. "Get out o' my way!" sez she, "'tis jest a common ha'penny fairin'— No, 'tis hamber, 'tis real purty!" 'a sez, an' brings up stock-still. Then out cooms th' necklace, an' down went 'a's good book slap i' th' dirt. "Oh! 'tis kind o' ye, blacksmith!" sez she, ketchin' hould on't. "Ah! but what thinks you o' this here?" sez I; "but I wunt gie it ye yet awhile, 'cause 'tis onlucky fer a maid to ha' th' ring afore th' day." Lor! what eyes 'a had, surelye! 'A thought a

bit, then sez she, " Thomas Clemmer, how much ha' ye got laid by ? " An' soon as I 'd tould her, sez she, " I 'll ha' ye, Tom, darlin', fer I never loved nane but you ! " Ah ! well, well ! Most onaccountable, 'tis, how th' very wureds cooms back to ye, arter years an' years ! '

He fell into a brown study, out of which he presently came with a jerk.

' Fower o'clock ? Never ! Gorm ! how high th' sun be ! I must be gotten hoame-along ! '

He rose upon his one serviceable foot, fitted the other foot, a shapeless bundle of linen, into the sling that hung from his neck, seized his crutches, and stumped placidly away. There was a direct path from the Seven Sisters across the green to Tom Clemmer's cottage, but he always came and went by the roundabout route through the churchyard. For the excellent, but frugal-minded Mrs. Clemmer had lain there, under a home-made iron cross and a carefully tended bed of marigolds, these twenty years back.

III

Living year after year in Windlecombe, I have come by old habit to associate with each month that passes its own characteristic changes and events. February always stands in my mind for three great ebullitions of the year's life,

equally wonderful in their several ways—the coming of the elm blossom, the earliest clamorous music from the lambing-pens, and the first rich song of the awakening bees.

Through my study window, all this week of warm, glittering, showery weather, I have watched the elm-trees about the churchyard gradually lose their sharp, clear-cut outline of winter, and dissolve into the misty softness of spring. Already the tree-tops are so dense that the blue sky can barely penetrate them. This change is not caused by the expanding leaf buds, but by the opening of the myriad blossoms, which come and go before the leaf. Their colour is a magnificent, sombre purple ; and the whole tree stands up in the sunshine, clad in this gorgeous raiment from its bole to its highest twig—an imperial garment reminding you in more ways than one of ancient Rome and its Cæsars ; for there is little doubt that the elm is no British tree, but was brought to us by the Romans, all those centuries ago, with so many other good things.

In the deep pockets of rich soil which have sifted down to the valleys, and in the shallower soil of our chalk hills, almost every species of forest tree makes generous growth. But perhaps nothing takes so kindly to highland Sussex conditions as the elm. The village gardens are fringed about with its beautiful, wide-spreading

shapes, and, in summer, griddled over with its long blue shadows. But no tree stands within a distance of its own height from any dwelling. Hard experience has taught men that the elm is undesirable as a near neighbour. Of all trees it is the most comely, because it is never symmetrical, but it owes this picturesque trait to a habit intolerable in a close acquaintance. Not only does the elm cast its great branches to earth at all times and without creak or groan of warning, but during the season of the equinoctial gales, you never know when the whole tree may not come toppling over in a moment, measuring its vast length on the ground with a sound like the impact of the heaviest wave that ever thundered against Beachy Head.

It was so that the King of Windlecombe, the oldest and mightiest elm through half the county, came down one pitch-black, tempestuous night in a September of long ago. None of the children, nor many of the younger folk in the village, now remember the King, where he towered up beyond the east wall of the churchyard, and every sunset threw his vast shadow half way up the combe. But they are all familiar with the story of his downfall. A wild night it was. Every window shook in its frame ; every chimney was an organ-pipe for the wind's blowing ; the sound of the rain on roof and wall was like an incessant hail of

musketry. Thatches were stripped off. The inn-sign went clattering down the street. The gilt weather-cock on the church tower took a list that it has kept to this day. No one dared go abroad that night, but families sat close at home, keeping shoulder to shoulder in timorous company, and dreadfully wondering what it was like at sea. Had you need to speak, you must shout your words, so great was the din of the hurricane. All night it raged undiminished, and no one slept; some even would not venture to bed, not knowing but the roof might be plucked off any moment as they lay, and let the drenching torrent in upon them. Then, as the first grey tinge of dawn blanced in the eastern sky, high above the voice of the storm came one tremendous booming note, as though the earth had split asunder. And with the light, people looked out and saw that the King of Windlecombe was down.

To-day, as I settled myself to work with the lattices tight closed, to shut out the lure of the songful morning, there came a patter of earth upon the glass. At first I thought it was one of the martins' nests broken away from the eaves above, being stuffed too full of hay by interloping sparrows. But the sharp volley sounded again, and looking out, there on the path below I beheld the old vicar in wide-brimmed hat and tartan shawl.

‘How now, old mole!’ cried he, shaking his stout oak cudgel at me. ‘The sun shines, the west wind calls, all the brooks are laughing over their beds! Yet there you hide in your burrow, grouting among dead words, warming up stale, cold dreams a twelvemonth old! Shame on you! Come out, and let the air and sunbeams riddle your dusty fur! Come and lend me your eyes for a long morning. I have seen to Mrs. Dawes’ rheumatics. I have done the school. Old Collup has had his bedside talk. I am free for a ramble, and I want to go everywhere and hear tell of everything. Come this moment, or I’ll huff and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house down!’

With his jolly, wrinkled face turned upward, his long white beard wagging, and his kind eyes steadily meeting mine, it was difficult to believe that he could see only the faintest shadow of all before him; that for years past he had lived and worked in a world of deepest dusk, wherein the very noontide sun of summer was no more than a pale spot in never-ending gloom. I got my thick boots, and was soon trudging down the hill with him towards the riverside woods and meadows, every yard of which had been familiar to him in his days of light.

Arun was running high, with three spring tides yet to come. Much rain had fallen of late. It

looked as though the floods would soon be upon us, unless the wind changed, and drier, colder weather set in. We skirted the river-bank, with the wind whipping light ripples almost to our feet, and the sun making a broad path of gold along the waters. Beyond the river stretched level green pastures intersected by deep dykes, and beyond these again lay the misty blue sierra of wooded hills. The old parson strode easily forward, his face turned up to the sky. His step never faltered, but his stick hovered incessantly about the path as he went.

‘Hark to the wind in the trees!’ he said. ‘That is a new voice: the elms must be in full bloom, and I can guess what they look like. And the sound is different in that clump of beeches there: the leaf-buds must be getting long and green now. Only the ash and the oak keep their winter voice in February.’

Thus it always was on our walks together. What he heard, he told me of; and what I saw, I gave him as well as I was able.

‘Listen!’ he said presently. ‘Did you hear that? That is the first chaffinch-song of the year! And there is the great-tit clashing his silver cymbals together, and the bullfinches blowing over the tops of their latchkeys, and a green woodpecker laughing—he never laughs in that grim, scornful way until the year is well on the wing!’

Then I, not to be behind him :

'I see grass—fresh new growth pushing up everywhere. Young nettles too: they are coming up green amongst the old dead stems. But they cannot sting yet—yes, they can! and badly! Stop here a moment, Reverend! The celandines are out thick on the bank—you remember their shining, yellow, five-rayed stars, set in dark green leaves like the spade-blades of Hamlet's diggers. Below on the bank, where it is too steep for anything else to grow, there are coltsfoot flowers. The drab earth glows with them—no leaves at all, but just long, curved, scaly stems, each ending in a tuft of golden fleece. And then there is——'

'I know, I know! I can look back a dozen springs, and see them all as well as you. But listen to that thrush! That is his honeymooning note, and the pair must be nesting not far away. I have found thrushes' nests in February many a time. See if you can find this one.'

'Your singer has flown. And there goes the hen, out of the other side of the bush; if the nest is anywhere, it will be here under this tangle of clematis. Yes, two eggs already! I wish you could see their clear greenish-blue, with the dapple-marks on it.'

I guided his hand to the nest, and his fingers wandered lightly over it.

‘Cold!’ said he. ‘She will not begin to sit yet. Perhaps never on this clutch. There is frost and snow ahead of us still, though all of us forget it this weather, bird, beast, and man.’

The path led us into the hazelwood; hazel below, and overhead soaring columns of beech, whose branches touched finger-tips everywhere across the white-flecked blue of the sky. As we went along, the sound of our footsteps in the fallen leaves was like the sound of wading through water. I must read off to him what I saw about me as though it were from a book.

‘The hazel-catkins were never so fine, I think, as they are this spring. The wood is full of them, like showers of gold-green rain falling. Whenever we brush against them, clouds of pollen drift off in the wind. It is the wind that makes the hazel-nuts which we gather by and by. What millions upon millions of spores only to make a few bushels of nuts! I struck a single bush with my stick just now, and, for yards ahead, the sunshine was misty with the floating green dust. Then, here and there on every branch——’

‘Yes! I can see it all! There are little green buds each with a torch of bright crimson at its tip, flaming in the sun. Why should they be so vividly coloured, if only to catch what the wind brings—floating pollen as blind as I? No, no! The hazel-nut was made for the bees

originally, depend upon it. Nature never uses bright colour unless to attract winged life.'

We came out of the wood on the south side. Stopping just within the shade of the last trees, we had a view over a chain of sunny, sheltered meadows that lay between the riverside willows and the first steep escarpment of the Downs. Here the wind was only a song above our heads. Scarce a breath stirred where we leaned upon the gate in the sunshine. I must be at my living book again, yet knew not where to begin, so crowded was the page.

'March is still three weeks off, and yet the hares are already as mad as can be. Over there under the Hanger, a mile away, I can see them racing and tumbling about together. There are more celandines and coltsfoot blossom everywhere. I can see daisies wherever I look, and there is a disc of dandelion by the gate-post just where you stand. What clouds of midges! Thousands are dancing in the air above our heads, and I can see their wings making a hazy streak of light all down the hedgerow, where the elders are in flourishing green leaf. Did you ever hear so many birds all singing at the same time? And there goes an army of rooks and jackdaws overhead! What a din!—the high, yelping treble of the daws, and the deep-voiced rooks singing bass to it.'

The Reverend put a hand upon my arm to stop me.

‘I can hear something else,’ he said. ‘A dandelion, did you say? Then she will come straight for it.’ And as he spoke, I heard the old familiar sound too. It was a hive-bee, tempted abroad by the glad spring sunlight. She came straight over the meadows. Passing all other blossoms by, she settled on the single flower half-hidden in its whorl of ragged green leaves close beside us, and forthwith began to smother herself in its yellow pollen.

‘And there she goes again!’ said the old vicar, as the soft, rich sound mingled once more with the myriad other notes about us. ‘High up into the air—doesn’t she?—making ever a wider and wider circle until she gets her first flying-mark, and then in the usual zigzag course, home to the hive! A bee-line! People always make the words stand for something absolutely straight and direct. But a true bee-line is the easiest way between two points, not necessarily the shortest. To take a bee-line, if folk only knew it, is just to fly through the calmest, or most favouring airs, judge the quickest way between all obstacles, dodge the ravenous tits and sparrows, and so get home safe and sound to the hive.’

IV

This spring, the Artletts have built their lambing-pens on the sunny slope of Windle Hill in full view of the village. When, at threshing-time last autumn, the waggons toiled up the steep hillside with their shuddering loads of yellow straw, and the ricks were fashioned end to end in a curving line against the north, strangers wondered why a farmer should carry his bedding-down material so far from its main centres of consumption, the stables and cowsheds. But the reason for the work is clear enough at last. Behind the solid rampart of straw, the lambing-pens lie in cosy shelter, and every day now sees them more populous; day and night, as the month wends on, there arises from them a fuller and fuller melody.

Alone, perhaps, of all other rural occupations, shepherding remains unaffected by the avalanche of machinery and chemistry which has descended upon agriculture. Here and there may be found a flockmaster who talks of shearing-machines, but it is rare to find anything but the old hand-clippers in use by the old-fashioned, wandering gangs of shearers. Flocks are larger, and so bring the modern shepherd more anxious care; but in all essential ways, his year's round of work is the same as in that time of old when the shep-



SPRINGTIME

herds watched their flocks by night near Bethlehem.

For the first time, in near upon fifty years, old Artlett has had no hand in the pen-making. Rheumatism, the life-long foe of the shepherd, has got him by the heels at last ; and, if it turn out with him as with nearly all his kind, he will never again leave the chimney-corner, until he is carried thence and laid to sleep beside his long line of forbears up in the churchyard. But young George is as good a shepherd as any of his line, in this, as in all other branches of the craft. Wherever you go among the neighbouring sheep-farms, you will hear tell of the amazing good luck of Windlecombe at lambing-time. George Artlett views the matter from a different standpoint.

We sat together in his cosy hut on the hillside, towards twelve o'clock of a gusty, moonlit night. The coke-fire burned in the little stove with a steady brightness, casting its red rays through the open door, and far out into the resounding night. Overhead a lantern swung gently to and fro, rocking our shadows on the walls. From the lambing-pens hard by there rose a ceaseless yammering chorus, and from the outer folds a confusion of tongues deeper still, mingled with the tolling of innumerable bells. George Artlett sat on the straw mattress in the corner, his knees drawn up to his chin.

D

'Ah! luck!' said he, a little scornfully, peering at me through the cloud of tobacco-smoke—all from my own pipe—which hovered between us. 'An' how be it then, as them as believes in luck, gets so onaccountable little on't? Gregory, over at Redesdown yonder—a wunt so much as throw a hurdle on a Friday, an' 'a wears a bag o' charm-stuff round 's neck, an' 'a wud walk a mile sooner 'n goo unner a laadder—well, how be it wi' un? Lambs dyin' every day, folks say; ah! an' yows too—seven on 'em gone a'ready! " 'Twill be thirteen," 'a sez, " thirteen, th' on-lucky number, an' then 'twill stop. 'Tis Redesdown's luck!" sez he; " ye can do nought agen it!" An' next year, 'a'll goo on feedin' short an' poor, jest as 'a allers doos; an' putten th' yows to th' ram too young; an' lambin' i' th' hoame-yard agen, where 'tis so soggy an' onhealthy, jest because 'tis near to 's bed. When a man doos his night-shepherdin', swearin' at th' laads through 's windy, 'a may well look fer bad luck!'

He rose, and drew on his great blanket-coat, and pulled his sou'wester over his eyes. Then he took down the lantern from its hook, and together we plunged out into the buffeting wind to make the round of the folds for the sixth time since my advent, although the night was but half over.

The moon was nearly at the full. In its flood

of pure white light, the lambing-yard, with its surrounding folds, looked like some extensive fortification, so high and impregnable seemed the walls that hemmed it in on every side. These walls were made of sheaves of straw, standing on end, shoulder to shoulder, of such girth and density that not a breath of the unruly wind could penetrate them. Within, the lambing-yard was floored a foot deep with the same straw, and on all sides were the pens, little separate bays flanked and topped by hurdles covered in with the like material. The whole place was crowded with ewes and lambs; the newest arrivals still in the pens with their mothers, the rest almost as snugly berthed out in the mainway of the yard. Outside this elaborate stockade were two great folds, the one containing the ewes still to be reckoned with, the other thronged with those whose troubles were happily over, and with whom already the cares and joys of motherhood were verging on the trite.

Shepherd Artlett took no chances at any stage of his work. At the entrance to the lambing-yard, he carefully covered up the lantern with his coat, and thereafter allowed its light to fall only where he need direct his scrutiny.

'Nane o' Gregory's luck fer me!' he said. 'There bean't no wolves on th' Hill nowadays, but sheep, they be jest as much afear'd o'

summat as 'twur born in 'em to dread. 'Tis in their blood, I reckons. Now look ye! A naked light carried i' th' haand, an' let sudden in upon 'em—see how it sets th' shadders dancin' an' prancin' all around! Like as not, 'tis so th' wolves came leapin' round th' folds ages an' ages back; an' so it bides in th' blood wi' all sheep—a sort o' natur's bygone memory. Froughten wan yow, an' ye be like to fraughten all. Set 'em stampedin', an' that means slipped lambs, turned milk, an' trouble wi'out end—Gregory's luck agen!

On these rounds, every pen in the yard was visited, and its denizens critically examined: not a sheep of the huddled, vociferating crowd through which we threaded our difficult course, but had her share in George Artlett's swift-roving glance. Here and there we came upon a new-born lamb, and then George took its four legs in one handful and carried it head downwards through the throng to the nearest vacant pen, its frantic mother bleating her expostulation close in our rear. There were the feeding-cages to fill with hay, and mangold to be carried in and scattered amongst the crouching sheep. Sometimes there was a sickly lamb or ewe to doctor, when we went trudging back to rifle the medicine-chest in the hut; and rarely a weakling, who refused its natural food, must be taken

under George's coat, a silent shivering woolly atom, and restored to life and voice by the warmth of our fire and the bottle.

In how great a measure the luck of Windlecombe or any sheep-farm depends on the foresight and tender care of the shepherd, was well brought home to me as, in the first ghostly light of morning, something like a crisis came to vary the monotonous round of our task. I had dozed off as I sat in my corner, and woke to find grey dawn picking out the tops of the hills, and George away on his unending business. Presently, through the little window at my side, I saw him coming back over the rimy grass, his coat bulged out with the usual burden. He set the lamb down on the straw by the fire. Limp and lifeless it looked, and past all aid; but George fell patiently to work swabbing it. As he worked, he talked.

' 'Tis White-Eye agen—a fine yow, but a on-accountable bad mother, 'a be, surelye. Purty nigh lost her lamb laast season, an' now agen 'tis ne'ersome-matter wi' un. Wunt gie suck. Butts th' little un away, 'a do. That, an' th' could, 'tis. Terr'ble hard put to 't, I wur, laast time, to save un! An' this—well: if 'a cooms round, 'twill be a miracle——'

He stopped to fetch his breath, then set to more vigorously than ever.

'Lorsh! I do b'lieve! . . . Ay! I'll do 't!
—better'n a score o' dead uns, 'a be, a'ready!
Now, shaap wi' th' bottle!'

But the wretched mute morsel of woolliness was too weak to suck. And then George Artlett did what I had never seen done before.

'Well, well!' he said confidently, 'we must try th' ould-fangled way wi' un!' He took a gulp of the warm milk, and bringing the lamb's mouth to his own, tenderly fed it. Again and again this was done, until life began to flicker up strong once more in the little creature's body.

'But mind ye!' said George, as presently he stood looking down on the resuscitated lamb, and regaling himself with its pitiful bleating, 'No more o' White-Eye! Off to Findon Fair 'a goos wi' th' draught-sheep next May, sure as she's alive!'

MARCH

I

THE charm of Sussex woods, though you may frequent them at all times in and out of season, is that they are never the same woods from year to year. The great trees, indeed, keep their old familiar forms and stations, but the undergrowth of hazel, ash, larch, or silver-birch is periodically cleared away. This year, a certain hillside or deep hollow may be hidden under a thicket of growth impenetrable not only to the casual wanderer, but to the very sunlight itself ; and next year the wood-cutters may have swept it clean, leaving only the forest trees to cast their shadows over a sunny wilderness that your eyes, though you have journeyed this way scores of times, have never yet beheld. Clearings wherein the children gathered primroses by the thousand one spring, are overgrown and all but impassable the next. The very paths and waggon-ways change their direction, as the woodmen vary the scene of their labours from year to year. And in the track of the copse-cutters,

arise all manner of new plants ; new birds come to nest ; new sights and sounds throng about the way at every turn—so, in nearly all seasons, a strange new land is brought to your very feet, in the midst of things familiar, maybe, for a score of years.

In the dead deeps of winter, nothing seems so remote, so hopelessly unattainable, as the March sunshine ; yet here it is at last, and here I am, sitting on a hazel-stole softly cushioned with ivy, alone and deliciously idle, in a clearing I have just discovered in the heart of Windle Woods.

All this part of the wood has lain untouched for a decade, perhaps, given over to the jays and magpies, and other wildest of wild nesting things. There is a green lane only a few hundred feet distant, and along it I have journeyed many a time during the past year, never dreaming that the clearing existed. And yet, no later than last April, the woodmen must have been here with their bill-hooks, hacking and hewing, and letting in the living sunlight where the earth had known no more than green gloaming on the brightest day.

It is strange how quickly the fertile soil awakens from such a lethargy of long, dark years. From where I sit, high upon the sunny slope, I can see nothing but greenery. All that remains of the dense growth of hazel, that covered this part of

the wood, is gathered into great square piles, looking like windowless houses set here and there on the sunny declivity. Primroses shine everywhere; truly not in the abundance of April, but still there is no yard of ground without their sulphur sheen. Red deadnettle makes a rosy flush in the grass at my feet. There is ground-ivy round the base of each hazel-stole, with its pale violet flowers, so minute, yet making such a brave show by sheer strength of numbers. And hovering everywhere over this still mere of sunshine, with its sunken treasure of blossom, are butterflies—great sulphur-yellow butterflies—flapping idly along, little tortoiseshells and peacocks that have laid up through the winter, and one gorgeous red-admiral, also a hibernator, veering about in the sunshine with outspread, motionless wings.

To this secret nook of woodland I came but an hour ago, yet in that one hour of still March sunshine, I have seen and heard more things than could be chronicled, perhaps, in a day's hard driving of the swiftest pen. To set down only the things that dwell foremost in the memory is not easy. I had been here only a few minutes when a rabbit came racing across the clearing, dodging in and out of the hazel-stoles in tremendous hurry and fear. On seeing me, he turned off at a sharp angle, then scurried away into the wood. A full

five minutes after came a stealthy rustling from the same direction, and a ruddy-furred stoat drew into view, his snake-like head alternately poised high in the sunshine and lowered amidst the grass, as he carefully picked up the rabbit's trail. He was going at only a tithe of the rabbit's pace, but going without an instant's hesitation. Where the rabbit had turned off at seeing me, the stoat also veered sharply round. He went straight for the wood, entering it, as far as I could judge, at exactly the same spot. So he would go on, I knew, until at last his blood-thirsty cunning and pertinacity had outworn the rabbit's speed.

Then a woodpecker came over the clearing, his crimson cap and tarnished jerkin of lincoln-green looking strangely tawdry and theatrical in the brilliant sunshine. He flew heavily yet swiftly, arresting the motion of his wings at every four or five beats, much as a finch flies. As he passed over, he uttered his weird call-note, that sounds something like 'Ploo-ee, ploo-ee!' wherein, however, there is a tang of crafty cynicism indescribable. Not far from where I sat was a beech-tree, and to this tree I watched him go. He climbed up the smooth bark like a cat, taking the trunk spiral-wise. Then, when almost at its summit, he stopped and beat out of the hard wood, with his pick-axe of a

bill, such a note as can be likened to nothing else in nature. So fast fell the blows of his beak, that between them no interval could be distinguished. They ran together into one smooth, continuous volume of sound. Extraordinarily musical it was, with a plaintive quality and a variableness of tone, now loud, now soft, that could not fail to impress the dullest ear. The note was prolonged for half a minute or so, and then the bird stopped to listen. Far away over the wood-top I heard the answering sound. For this woodpecker-music in springtime is a true love-call, and you will hear it onward through the months until the last pair of birds is mated in the wood.

This is the time when the queen-wasps come out of their winter hiding-places, and the first bumble-bees appear. Of the hive-bees very few seek out these isolated clearings; they have all gone to the riverside where the willows and willows are in bloom. But as I sat listening to the medley of birds and insect-voices around me, trying to pick out one after the other from the chaos of song, I heard the soft note of a honey-bee down in the blue veronica close at hand. Yet she touched none of the flowers. She passed all by, and went scrambling down among the moss and dead leaves. Knowing that the honey-bee never wastes time, and anxious to find out

what she might be doing there, I watched her as she painfully went over the moss-fronds one by one, sending forth a shrill, fretful note at intervals, very like an interjection of disappointment at not finding what she needed. At last her search came to a successful end. It was a dew-drop she had been seeking, one of the few that had escaped the thirsty glances of the sun. Silently she drank. And then, as she rose into mid-air with her burden, there was no mistaking the triumphant quality of her song. At this time, water is the all-important factor in the prosperity of the hive; and the bee knew well she was carrying home something of greater worth even than a load of the purest honey.

Leaving the clearing at length, I went homeward by a roundabout way, through the oldest part of the wood. Traversing one of the shadiest paths, where the oaks grew thick together overhead, I came to a turn in the way. Just beyond, there was a single spot of sunshine lying on the moss-green path, and in it a squirrel gambolled, as though he were taking a bath in the yellow pool of light. Often throughout the winter I had come upon squirrels thus, tempted out of their warm winter-houses by some day of exceptional mildness. For the squirrel is no true hibernator. He sleeps through the cold spells, often for weeks at a stretch. But, like the hive-bees, warm

weather at once rouses him from his dray, and sends him forth ravenous to his secret store of acorns or beech-mast.

Old Tom Clemmer once told me of a custom regarding the squirrel which, in his boyhood, was rife in most Downland villages. On Saint Andrew's Day, towards the end of each November, most of the Windlecombe men and boys used to foregather on the green, armed with short sticks, shod at one end with some heavy piece of metal. The party would then go out into the woods for this, the annual squirrel-hunt, or 'skugging' as it was called. The weighted sticks were thrown at the squirrels as they leaped in the branches overhead; and some of the folk, Tom Clemmer himself among the number, were famous for their skill at this pastime. Skugging, however, being essentially a poor man's brutal sport, has been long ago suppressed.

My squirrel in the pool of sunshine blocked the path, and there was no way round. I must perforce disturb him. I watched him clamber upward into the wilderness of budding oak-boughs, his glossy red-brown coat gleaming in the sunshine as he went.

Presently, coming into a spacious valley of beeches, where the eye could wander far and wide, between the grey-green trunks, over a bare, undulating carpet of last year's leaves—for

scarcely anything will grow under beech—I caught sight of an object which drew my steps over to the near hillside. It was a spot of shining white painted about breast high on the smooth bark of one of the trees. I knew what it meant. It was the White Spot of Doom—the token of the woodreeve to his men that the tree was to be felled ; and this was the time, when the sap was beginning to run strong and rinding would be easy, for the death sentence to be carried out.

I looked at the white spot, and if I could have saved the tree by obliterating it there and then, I would have done so gladly. Carved deeply into its wood, and so long ago that the characters were all but illegible, was a double set of initials, and, between them, two hearts at once united and transfixed by the same arrow. Below these roughly-hewn signs a date appeared. I had often come upon the legend in my walks, and stopped to ruminate over it. Who had cut it I never knew, nor indeed whether C. D. and L. E. W., if they were alive to-day, would have joined with any enthusiasm in my desire for its preservation. But somehow it came to me at the moment as an infinitely pathetic thing, that the tree should be cut down after all those years, and the record destroyed—it had been done so obviously for perpetuity. What kind of stony-hearted villain must the woodreeve have been,

I thought to myself, who could daub that patch of white paint so callously near to the silent eloquence of such an inscription ?

Out of the far distance now, as I lingered over the carving in that mood of moralising sentimentality, there came creeping up the hollow stillness of the glade a murmur of voices, and, in a little, the tramp of heavy feet. I recognised the gang of woodmen carrying the tools of their craft ; and behind them a little rabble of village-folk, mostly children. I drew off some way up the hillside, and sat me down on a stump, to look on at the now imminent, as well as inevitable spectacle.

To watch a great tree felled, especially when such a giant as this lovers' tree was in question, is one of the most exciting things to be met with in country-life. There is ever growing suspense for the onlooker from the moment when the first axe-blow sends its echo ringing through the aisles of the wood, to that last stunned feeling after the mighty tree is down. The speed and workman-like dexterity with which the gang now got to their task only served to intensify this sensation. One buckled on a pair of climbing-irons and carried aloft two long ropes, securing them to the trunk at its highest point of division. While he was still up there, like a perching crow black against the sky, another took a great glittering

axe, and, stepping slowly round the tree, dealt it a succession of downward and inward blows, cutting out a deep ring all round the bole some six or eight inches above ground-level. On the side towards which the tree was to fall, this cut was now widened and deepened until it laid bare a good foot breadth of the solid heart of the wood. And while the amber chips were still flying under the axe, the rest of the gang were carrying the ropes away at two sharp angles, and binding them securely to neighbouring trees.

And now began the crucial part of the business. The great wood-saw was got to work, with four strong men at it. Cutting close to the ground on the far side of the tree, the shining blade tore its way steadily into the wood. Inch by inch it drove its ragged teeth forward, and at every lunge it gave forth a savage gasping scream, and a spume of yellow sawdust spirted from the cut, gathering in an ever-growing heap on either side. No other sound broke the stillness of the glen for a full ten minutes or more. No one among the mute, expectant crowd, nor any of the woodmen, seemed to move hand or foot. All watched and waited, as it appeared, breathlessly. There were just these four strong men labouring to and fro, the flash of the hungry saw-blade in the sunlight, and the harsh sudden screech of the direful thing every time it ripped at the vitals of the tree. The

gang of woodmen had divided at a sign from their chief, and stood, three or four of them bearing on each rope. The leader watched the saw, a hand on each hip. Once he raised a hand: the saw stopped; a row of steel wedges was driven in behind it; the saw began once more its old rasping melody. At last the hand went up again. The work was done. I could see the black line of the cut reaching within an inch or so of the deep axe-cleft on the face of the tree.

Long ago, on shipboard, I had been present at the firing of one of the heaviest guns that ever put to sea; and what followed now reminded me strangely of that deafening experience. The leader marshalled his men, and directed operations with short, sharp words of command, much as the gun-lieutenant had done. There was the same busy preparation and skurrying to and fro, the same moment of suspense, the same terrific outcome. Every available man was now set to haul on the ropes, while the leader of the gang himself took a mallet and, with mighty blows, drove the wedges in. Thick and fast the blows fell, and their echoes went chevying each other down the ravine. The vast-spreading tree quaked, lashed its branches wildly about overhead. The crowd of waiting children and old women were ordered farther back from the zone of danger. Now the great mallet redoubled its

B

blows, and the two gangs of men bore on the ropes with all their might and main. Still, though the commotion overhead increased to the force of a hurricane, no other sign of movement other than a faint shudder, was visible in the trunk of the tree. One last blow of the mallet, and one last pull all together, and then a sharp crack sounded, as it were, from the bowels of the earth. The ropemen leant back in one huge final effort, then dropped the ropes, and ran for their lives. There came a slithering, tearing noise as the mighty beech toppled forward, tearing itself from the clinging, cumbering embrace of its age-long fellows, then down it came to earth with one long, rolling, thunderous, crackling roar.

Where I stood, I felt the solid earth quake and shudder. Between the moment when the uppermost branches of the great tree began to force their way in a wide, descending arc through the thicket of intercepting branches, and the moment of the last terrific boom, as the trunk struck the earth, there seemed a strangely long interval of time. Another thing struck me with all the force of unimaginable novelty. All the undermost branches of the tree as it fell were splintered into a thousand fragments, and these, flying upward and outward, in a great cloud, gave an effect as if the mighty trunk had fallen into water.

And now I learned for the first time why all the

poor folk had followed the woodmen with their baskets. The tree was no sooner prone on the ground, and the last soaring splinter come rattling out of the sky, than a rush was made to the spot by all. Here was firewood in plenty for every one, as much as each could gather or carry. And it was firewood already chopped.

II

It was Tennyson who first set us looking for kingfishers in March, though, indeed, the 'sea-blue bird' makes the riverside beautiful at all seasons. There is a little creek here, winding away from the main current of the river through a thicket of willow and alder, where, coming stealthily along the shadowed footpath, you can always hear the shrill, creaking pipe of the bird, and generally catch the glint of his gay plumage as he darts down-stream, or sits on some branch overhanging the clear, brown water.

But it was from the stern-seat of the old ferryman's boat that I learnt whatever I know about kingfishers and river life in general; and these secret excursions seldom began until March was well under way. For me, therefore, the kingfisher, as for all Tennyson lovers, is most clearly associated with the still barren hedgerows and brakes, the song of the thrush mounted high

amidst leafless branches, and that wonderful array of crimson tassels and brown bobbins, all set in a mist of pale green needles, which at this time makes the larch one of the sights of the country-side.

I have said secret excursions ; and, indeed, all my relations with old Runridge during recent years have necessarily taken on this furtive character. It was not always so. In happier days, when the old man was a widower, I used to drift down to his cabin by the water-side for a quiet pipe at all seasons of the day and openly, whenever the mood seized me. Then, if tide and the weather served, we would take the little skiff and go off for hours together exploring the shiest nooks of the river, either with or without the ancient fowling-piece that hung over his kitchen hearth. At these times the ferry was left to take care of itself, which it did sufficiently well, there being often quite a little collection of pennies on the thwart of the boat when the old man got back from these unpremeditated truantries.

But, one fateful day, a distant cousin of Runridge's arrived on a visit—a sedate, ponderous woman, very black as to brows and eyes, and with a hard, shiny face whose colour seemed all on the surface, like red paint. She never went away again, for within the month she became Mrs. Run-

ridge. From that day, for peace and quiet's sake, the old ferryman and I pursued our ancient courses only by stealth. Fortunately Mrs. Runridge had a genius for household economy, which led her to eschew the village shop, and took her off with her basket at least once a week to Stavisham and its cheaper wares. This was always our opportunity; and regularly on the town market-days, when Mrs. Runridge and her basket had been safely stowed into the carrier's cart and it had turned the distant bend of the lane, the little green wherry set forth over the shining tide with its self-congratulatory crew, bent on visiting the 'harns,' or looking for reed-warblers' nests, or anything else that might fit the occasion.

To-day we went up on the full tide, and turned into the little creek where the kingfishers have their nests. It has been one of those dead-still, cloudless days, that so often come in mid-March just before the gales of the equinox—a halcyon day, in very truth. As our little craft sped up the glittering pathway of the waters, hardly a whisper sounded in the dense jungle of reeds that flanks the river here on either side. The tree-tops stood motionless against the sky—one clear, blue arch except where just above the horizon a series of white clouds peered over the hill-tops like a row of beckoning hands. The willows on

the banks were full of yellow blossom in which the bees crowded ; their soft music was with us wherever we went. Larks carolled overhead. Thrushes, blackbirds, hedge-sparrows sang in every bush. There was a great cawing and dawing from the rookeries, where the black companies had returned for the season, and were busy furbishing up their nests. We drove our boat's prow through the willow branches that all but hid the entrance to the creek, then let her drift idly down the narrow way until we gained the broader basin near the footbridge, and moored her to an overhanging branch.

Keeping quiet and still in our corner, we had only a few minutes to wait. The familiar, high-pitched cry rang out from the sunny breadth of the river. And then, into the cool, grey light, came what looked like a flying spark of emerald fire. The bird pitched on a wand of willow that drooped nearly to the water just opposite our retreat. Here he sat awhile carelessly preening his magnificent feathers. Below him the water lay glassy-still and clear, reflecting his tawny breast and the rich chequer-work of gold blossom and blue sky overhead. The kingfisher did not watch the stream with that motionless vigilance that one reads of in the nature books. He seemed to give the gliding water scarce a thought, but to be intent only on the contemplation of his

own finery, as he twirled on his perch, reaching now and again over his shoulder to set straight a feather that had gone awry.

But suddenly he stopped in this popinjay performance, pointed his bill downward, and plunged like a stone. The glittering emerald vanished. On the mirror of the waters there spread ring within ring of light. What seemed like whole minutes passed in waiting and silence. And then all the brilliant green and blue and amber burst into view again, as the bird came up in a scatter of diamonds, and lanced straight back to his perch. Now we could see he held a minnow, a little writhing atom of silver, crosswise in his beak. He struck it to and fro on the hard wood until he had killed it. Then, at a single gulp, it was down his throttle. Again the kingfisher sat preening his gorgeous plumage, with the same dilettante touch and light carelessness, as though the shining treasury of the waters below concerned him not a jot.

III

I often wonder how it is that the old saying, about March and its leonine or lamb-like incomings and outgoings, should have kept so sturdily its place in popular credence. Looking through a pile of old note-books ranging back over a

couple of decades or so, I find that, in the majority of years, March has both begun and ended in the lamb-like character. The lion appears only in the rôle of an interloper, a go-between; for, almost invariably, there has been a period of chilly, riotous weather sometime after the middle of the month.

So it has come about this season. Yesterday was a day without a flaw; and as the sun began at last to mellow and decline, dragging a net of shining golden haze behind it over the western hills, I gave up a day-long, though still unfinished task, and went to sit awhile on the churchyard wall.

The north-west wall is the last rampart of Windlecombe. It is made of flint, with an oval, red-brick coping of generous breadth: there is none in the parish, as far as I know, but can be comfortable upon it. Sitting thereon side-saddlewise, you have a view, on the one hand, of the grey stones and evergreenery of the churchyard, and, on the other, your glance can wander unchecked straight down the combe to the river, then forward over the brook-country to the far-off Stavisham woods. As yet the light had abated scarce a jot of its dynamic brilliance. Shadows were long, and the white house-fronts had taken on a leaven of rosy sweetness; but in the most retiring nooks it was still broad day.

I turned my back on the serene prospect of level plain, where here and there the sunlight picked out a glittering coil of river, and set myself to the contemplation of a remarkable fellowship near at hand.

Close by the wall stood an almond-tree, its wide-spreading branches covered to the tips with pink blossom, and behind it glowered and gloomed a venerable yew. The one tree, as it were, reached out glad, welcoming arms to the spring, squandering its all to make one hour of joyous festival at the return of the prodigal light ; the other turned but a niggardly side-eye on all the inflowing radiance of the season. It seemed to be trying to do its least and worst, to discount the extravagant jubilation of its neighbour. For very shame it could not wholly resist the call of the sunshine. Grudgingly it put forth, at the tip of each sombre green frond, a sparse sprig of lighter green. And because the almond-tree threw down its spent blossom in largesse of rosy litter upon the grass below, this dour-natured vegetable, turning its necessities to virtuous account, now shed the dead brown buds of the foregoing year, sending this rubbish fluttering to earth with the same hesitant, sidelong action with which the almond petals fell, as though in a mockery of imitation.

As I sat on the wall with my back to the

declining sun,—humouring this, and many similar far-fetched, vain conceits as the best antidote I knew against the day's long overstrain of fancy,—high overhead in the church tower hard by, the bell began its quiet summons for evensong. Through gaps in the thicket of ilex and laurel, I saw, first, the tall, gaunt figure of the Reverend go by on the litten-path with his vast, confident stride, the pallid threadpaper of a curate flickering at his heels. After them came Miss Sweet, the rich and lonely spinster up at the great house, mincing along under a puce sunshade, with an extended handful of ivory books ; then Mrs. Coles from the farm, as ever, hot and out of breath ; finally, at a respectful interval carefully calculated, three or four of the village women dribbled through, and disappeared into the north porch after the rest.

The usual weekly congregation being now complete, the bell stopped. The harmonium gave out one low, sonorous note, which on weekdays was the beginning and end of its share in the service. For the next twenty minutes, no other sound drifted over to me but the clucking and whistling of the starlings on the chancel roof. And then, having become again immersed in the affair of the yew and almond trees, both now alike steeped by the setting sun in the same rose-red dye, I was startled by a hand on my

arm. The Reverend stood at my side, ruddy-faced, red-bearded, the very blackness of his clothes changed mysteriously to the like glowing hue. His kind eyes looked straight into mine, just as if he could see them.

'A fine evening, isn't it?' he said, 'just one rich flood of crimson without form—only a great light spreading up the sky from where the sun has disappeared; spreading up and gradually paling and changing until there is nothing but pure blue, with one silver peg of a star sticking in it—is it not so?'

'Why, no, it is not quite that,' said I, considering, 'the star is there sure enough, and the great red light. But the red does not merge into blue, it melts gradually into a wonderful, luminous, metallic green, with the star, almost white, swimming in the midst of it. Far overhead the sky is blue enough, and up there more stars are blinking out every moment. But the green! If you could only see its——'

'Snow!' interrupted the old vicar placidly.

'What!'

'Snow. Wind first, a gale perhaps; and then the snow. You will see. What says the almond-tree here?'

'It says,' I contended, 'but one word. Spring!—abounding new life and growth; sunshine kindling stronger and stronger every day;

the winter gone and already half forgotten. With every pink bloom it promises nightingales, and white flannels and straw hats and——'

'Ah! And you never will grow up now: you're too old. The almond-blossom?—it lies in my memory always side by side with the snowdrop and the Christmas-rose. Snow-flowers, all three! Wait a little, and be convinced. But now look, and tell me which way the chimney-smoke is blowing.'

'Blowing! There is not a breath of——'

There was more than a breath down there in the fair-way of the combe, although here we could feel nothing of it. Under the deep red dusk I could make out the smoke-plumes from the village chimneys all driving off at a sharp right-angle to the south. Even as I looked, there came a sudden flaw of wind overhead that set the yew boughs rocking, and its voice was the old-remembered voice. The north wind again! Somewhere in its black tangled depths the yew-tree creaked derisively. The Reverend put his arm through mine.

'But it is mercifully late,' he said, as we turned homeward together. 'Artlett need not fear for his lambs now, nor I for mine. Is the sky already overcast? Or am I only blinder than usual?'

IV

After that day I was house-bound for near upon a week. Later than its wont by a good hour, the dawn broke every day ; but as in darkness so with the grey wan light, the wind never abated one iota of its whistling fury ; the soft thud-thud of the flying snow reverberated on the panes ; the white drifts at the street corners mounted steadily higher and higher ; in the fireplace, where I already thought soon to start my summer fernery, I had the logs crackling and glowing with more than their old wintry might. Poor almond-blossom ! I thought to myself again and again, as I sat industriously scratching away in the strange dumbness and the thin, queer light that fills the room in snowy weather.

Yet this was not so ill a wind but that some good was blown my way. I found myself overhauling arrears of work at a surprising rate. When the wind fell at last, backing steadily to west, then to south-west, and there came a night of drenching rain—rain that felt like hot tea to a hand held out in it—I was ready for any sort of idleness and any wandering company.

Two long days and nights the world lay under that simmering, steaming cataract. And then such a morning—almost the last morning of the month—rose over Windlecombe as made the

mere awakening in one's bed seem like a sort of first act in a miracle play.

The sun had hardly breasted Windle Hill before I was out and clear of the village : its last red tinge had faded into night when I turned my tired steps homeward, and so to bed once more.

Lying there cosily, with the delicious ache of thirty miles in my bones, and in my ears the lilt of a thousand melodies, all the glad day's journey projected itself like swiftly changing pictures thrown upon the screen of the starry night. The Downs first—the green sea of hills that seemed to heave and subside as the violet cloud-shadows lazily drove from crest to crest ; the unending sheep-bell music, and lark-song, and the playing of the gulls high up in the blue, like scraps of white paper fluttering in the breeze. Then down the steep hill-side to the sunny flats, where the plovers were at their love-play—each pair rising and falling, somersaulting together, crying continually, coming to rest a moment, then up again at the old interminable gambols.

Here in the deep ditches the frogs croaked. There was a golden rim of marsh-marigold to every strip of water, over which you must peer if you would study the submerged life below. And what a life there was down in each crystal deep ! Queer water-beetles wove a bright pattern on the surface of the slow-moving, almost stagnant

stream ; and their shadows made just the same pattern on the sunlit weed of the bottom, though here it was black instead of bright. Down there were mimic forests or jungles of ferny, bronze-green growth, all in gentle undulating motion as the water glided imperceptibly by. Shoals of minnows cruised about in the sunny open, or lay in wait singly in the shadowy glades. These single fish seemed to be for ever quarrelling ; either making sudden raid on the lairs of their neighbours, or being attacked in their turn. When they banded themselves together, evidently making common peace the better to rout a common enemy, and swam boldly in the sunshine, I could see that each fish was faintly tinged with blue and green and orange-red, the identical colours, although vague and subdued, of the kingfisher, their traditional foe.

Then came up the vision of a long white road barred with tree-shadows, flowing between thorn-hedges already full of a green promise of leafage, and edged with butterfly-haunted flowers. Little cottages passed by, ankle-deep in blue forget-me-nots, and aflare with blossoming creepers. Deep pine-woods took the road and folded it in fragrant gloom, then set it forth in the sunshine again to wander over gorse-clad heaths, or amidst spangled meadows. I saw the inn, where I sat awhile in a company of travelling 'rinders'

—men who strip the bark from the felled oaks for the tanneries—who would now be camping, like Robin and his merry rascals, a month long in the woods.

I dozed off, and woke again where, in the drowsy afternoon sunshine, I had rested under a great pollard ash weighed down with ivy. Upon the grass about my feet there shone an infinity of small, rounded objects, much as if Aladdin had passed by and thrown down a handful of superfluous rubies. Everywhere their soft carmine lustre gemmed the sward. Year by year I have found the like on meadow-paths, wood-rides, by the church tower, sometimes in the very streets of the village, and have never known how they came into being. You may have broken asunder the ivy-berries a hundred times, and noted the pale-hued seeds within, yet never guessed that here was the mining-ground for your treasure. It is the sun and air that make rubies of the fallen ivy seeds.

And, for a last vision, as I lay watching the starshine travelling across the square of the window, I saw within it a picture, and heard again a note of music, perhaps the most wonderful thing in the whole day's idle round. It was a keeper's cottage at the entrance to a wood. On the steep thatch, white pigeons hobbled amorously; and behind, in a green bower of



THE RINDERS

elder, a wild bird sang. I could see the bird ; I knew it to be a common song-thrush ; but the song was the song of a nightingale—not the loud, silver-toned warble that the poets love, but the low, slow, sorrowful keening that always seems as if torn from the very heart of the bird. And here is a pretty problem. If the nightingale were already with us, singing in every brake, there would be nothing strange in the thrush—prone as he is to imitation—borrowing a stanza from the new melody here and there. But it is more than strange that he should do so at the present time, seeing that, for eight or nine months back, there has been no nightingale music in the land. Yet we, who are mute fowl, are all thinking of April now, and what it has in store for us : can the thrush be thinking of April too ? And, as with us, can old memories of nightingales be stirring in him ?—in him that alone can sing his thoughts aloud ?

APRIL

I

SUNDAY morning in Windlecombe, especially when the season is early April and the weather fine, is, of all mornings, the one not to be spent indoors.

To-day, until the church-bell had ceased its quiet tolling, and the last belated worshipper had hurried up the street, I stood just within the screen of box-hedge that divides my garden from the public way, so as not to obtrude my old coat and pipe and week-day boots on those more ecclesiastically minded. And then, bare-headed, hands thrust deep into trouser-pockets, and pipe leaving a grey trail of smoke behind on the tranquil air, I lounged out upon the green—deserted and still in the sweet April sunshine—to study Windlecombe under one of its most inviting aspects—its seventh-day spirit of earned sloth and unstrung, loitering ease.

Though the old vicar has held his post here for nearly half a century, and is better acquainted with the parish than almost any other, there is

just this one aspect of life in Windlecombe which must be to him for ever a sealed book. When once he has got his little flock together for morning service, with the church-door shut upon them, the village and all its doings pass, for the time being, out of his ken. On wet Sundays, and on the great church festivals, he knows that many accustomed corners—my own included—will be as infallibly occupied as they are at other times unvaryingly empty : and thereof he never makes either complaint or question. He goes on his way, never doubting but there is some saving good somewhere in the worst of us, and whole-heartedly loving us all ; while we, the black sheep, who would sacrifice for him our right hands, our money, our very lives even, anything but our fine Sunday mornings, go our ways too, satisfied—if there is meaning in looks—of his secret sympathy. For there never was human man, whether lay or clerical, who, of a fine Sunday morning, believed himself so nearly at one with his Maker on his knees in a dusty pew, as abroad in the vast green church of an English country-side.

I had gone no more than a dozen paces over the level, worn grass of the green, when I stopped to look about me, knowing well what I should see. Like rabbits coming out of their burrows after the gunner has passed on, the non-churchgoing folk began to appear. I saw young Daniel Dray

and young Tom Clemmer go off with a bag of ferrets and their faithful terriers at their heels. Dewie Artlett arrived at the well-head—the traditional meeting-place for Windlecombe lovers—and stood waiting there with a big nosegay of primroses in his hand and another in his cap. He was joined a moment later by one of the girls from the farm, and off they went together for a morning's sweethearting in the lanes. At the far end of the green, the inn-door came clattering open, and that genial reprobate, the inn-keeper, appeared in his shirt-sleeves, blinking up at the sky as though but lately out of his bed. Other doors here and there were thrust back, each giving egress to some happy loiterer in his Sunday best. Within five minutes, almost every garden-gate had a pair of brown arms comfortably resting on it, and voices began to pass the time of day to and fro in the whole sunny length of the street. By easy stages, stopping for a word here and there by an open door, or a chat with some old acquaintance sunning himself amidst his cabbages, I got to the foot of the hill and so to the river. The ferryman sat in his boat, but as he returned me for my greeting only a stare and a scarce-perceptible shake of the head, I knew that our common enemy was in ambush close by. I made off along the river-path, and turned into the woods.

There was a blackbird singing somewhere in the budding thicket, and I managed to get quite close to his perch without being seen. To the songs of birds like the thrush, the skylark, the robin, you may listen for five minutes ; and, beautiful as they are, in that short space of time you will have learnt all that the song has to tell. But the blackbird's song is very different. It has an endless succession of changes in rhythm, power and quality. You may listen to it for an hour, and never hear a phrase repeated in its exact form. The difference between the blackbird's song, and that of nearly all other birds, is the difference between the singing of a happy schoolgirl and that of a *prima donna*. While both have melody, one alone has finished artistry. Until you have stayed in a wood with a blackbird a whole sunny April morning through, and got from him the truth of things as he alone can tell it, you do not really know that spring is here.

Now, by the riverside copse, as I leaned on the old, lichen-gilded timbers of the fence, listening to the pure, unhurried notes, the fact that it was really April at last was suddenly borne in upon me. In the daybreak and eventide choruses of birds, the thrushes, by dint of sheer numbers and vehemence, easily overpower all other singers. Now and again you can catch and isolate a matchless phrase of blackbird music ;

but to hear the song in perfection, you must wait until the day is wearing on towards noon, and he seeks solitude for his singing.

If bird-song is a language, then the blackbird must be the supreme orator of the woods. Though you understand not a syllable of what he is pouring forth, there is no doubt of its ever-varying meaning. In the midst of a succession of quite simple phrases, each consisting of three or four notes at the most, he suddenly gives you a passage whose melodious complexity is almost bewildering. He constantly varies the pace of his delivery. He embellishes his song with grace-notes—beautiful silver-chiming triplets in the midst of his lowest, most leisurely strains. There is emphasis, attack, a sort of blustering use of sheer power of utterance ; or he may run over a slow, quiet tune at his lightest tongue-tip. At times, indeed, it is well-nigh impossible to believe that you are not listening to two birds together, of totally different qualities of voice, alternating their melodies.

How long I should have tarried there, furtively renewing this old acquaintance, I know not ; but it seems my cover was incomplete, and the song came to its usual termination. It stopped short in the midst of one of its brightest stanzas, and I knew my presence had been observed. The blackbird made off. There was first the

defiant, yet fearsome cluck-cluck-cluck until he was clear of the bushes and free to fly, and then away he went through the sunshine to the far bank of the river, hurling over his shoulder as he went the usual mocking laughter-peal.

II

A week of April has gone by—a week of rain and shine, and the singing of the south wind by day ; and, at nights, an intense dark calm full of the sound of purling brooks.

The river runs high. All the streams are swollen. The low-lying meadows are half green grass overspread with a pink mist of lady's-smock, and half glittering pools of water that bring down the blue of the sky under your feet as you go. You can never forget the rain for an instant. On this page, as I sit writing at the open window, the morning sun was streaming a minute ago : now a ragged grey rain-cloud has come tumbling over the hills, and I cannot see across the green for the torrent. It is by almost as quickly as I can set down the words ; and now the sunbeams are pouring in at the window again : the whole village lies before me drenched and sparkling, the street one long river of blinding light.

Tom Artlett, going by early this morning to his work and spying me in the garden, called

out that he had heard the cuckoo twice already ; and it may well be so. The ringing note of the wryneck—the ' cuckoo's mate '—has been sounding in the elm-tops all the morning through, and the cuckoo is seldom far behind her messenger. Nightingale and swift, swallow and martin, they are all on their way northward now, and any day may bring them. But time spent at this season in looking forward to the things that will be, is always time wasted. Every hour in early April has its own new revelation, and common eyes and ears can do no more than mark the things that are.

Yesterday, in a blink of sunny calm between the showers, I took my midday walk through the hazel-woods. The young leaves already tempered the sunlight to the primroses and anemones that covered the woodland floor, giving all a greenish tinge. Though the whole wood was full of primroses, it was only by the edges of the fields, where they grew in full sunshine, that their rich yellow colour had any significance. Here under the hazels this was so diluted and explained away by the white of the anemones, and again by the leaf-filtered sunbeams from above, that the primroses no longer seemed yellow. At a few yards distant, in the dimmest spots, you could scarce tell one flower from another but for its shape.

Wherever I went in the wood, the soft droning song of the bees went with me. You could hardly put one foot before the other without dashing the cup from the lip of one of these winged wanderers. But though the anemones and primroses grew so thick, so inextricably mingled together, the honey-bees kept to the one species of flower. They clambered in and out of the star-like anemones, sometimes two and three at a blossom together. But the primroses were always passed over, by hive-bee and humble-bee alike. Here and there, I picked one of the sulphur blossoms, and tearing it apart, made sure that there was nectar in plenty—its presence was plain even to human eye. The truth was, of course, that the sweets of the primrose were placed so far down the trumpet-tube of the flower, that no bee had tongue long enough to gather them, even if they were to her mind.

Yet though the bees might scorn the primrose for much the same reason as the fox contemned the grapes in the fable, there was one creature specially told off by Nature to do the necessary work of fertilisation. Now and again in the general low murmur of voices about me, I could distinguish an alien note. This came from a large fly, in a light-brown fluffy jacket, with transparent wings fantastically scalloped in black. He jerked himself to and fro in the air from one

primrose to another, hovering a moment over each before settling and thrusting a tongue of amazing length down the yellow throttle of the flower. His name I have never heard, but I know that, until recent times, he continued to conceal, not only his means of livelihood, but his very existence from the vigilance of naturalists : Darwin himself failed to identify this primrose-sprite with his special mission in fertilising work.

It is strange how familiarity with the commonest natural objects may exist side by side with a pitiful ignorance about them. I had gathered primroses every spring for half a lifetime through before I realised that I bore, not one, but two kinds of blossom in my hand. The discovery, I remember, came with something like a shock of surprise. Yet there was no blinking the fact : the wonder, indeed, was that in all the thousands I had gathered, as boy and youth and man, the thing had never before occurred to me. There was no difference in the sulphur-hued faces of the flowers. But while the deep, central tube of some was closed with a little whorl of pale buff feathers, in others this tube was open, and there stood just within it a slender stem topped with a small green globe—it seemed at first sight, then, that the sexual principle in the primrose was divided, each plant bearing only male, or only female flowers. But investigating farther, I

found that this was not so. Each flower was truly hermaphrodite, only in one the male feathery anthers were uppermost, and in the other the green pistil of the female appeared above.

Thirty years it took me to discover these simple, obvious facts about a thing I had handled every spring since childhood: how many decades more, I wonder, must pass ere I shall clear up the final mystery about them, a matter now to me dark as ever—how, with the primrose alone, this came to be so; and, above all, why?

III

If I tell the plain, honest truth about the day which has just ended, and call it a day of adventure and excitement from its first grey gleam to its tranquil golden close, I am not sure that there are many who will understand me, save the one who shared it with me almost hour by hour.

For nothing really happened on this day, as the world estimates events. Over an obscure Sussex village, a mid-April sun shone out of a cloudless sky; certain migrant birds arrived in the neighbourhood; certain wild flowers and insects were observed for the first time; there was nothing more. No wandering stranger appeared in the street, to bring us all to our

doors ; no big-gun practice was going on thirty miles away at Portsmouth, outraging our blue sky with incongruous thunder ; nor did even the gilt arrow on the church-clock slip an hour at midday, as it often does, and send us scurrying home to dinner before the time. To all save two in Windlecombe, the day was just an ordinary working week-day ; but, to these, it was no less a day than the one on which the year comes suddenly into its full young prime.

For me it began when the grey eastern sky took its first tint of morning rose. There is no sweeter sound than the song of the house-martins, and this it was that roused me now. In the darkness they had come, straight to their old nesting-site under the eaves ; and now they filled the room with their quaint, voluble melody, and wove a mazy pattern against the sky as they circled to and fro.

While I dressed, I watched them dipping and crying in the sunny air ; and, peering out through the window now and again, I could see them all along under the eaves, clinging to the rough bricks of the wall, where they had left their mud-houses last October. But of these none remained now. Not to break down the martins' nests in early spring, before the sparrows begin to stuff them with grass, is to prepare for the little black-and-white voyagers' war instead of

welcome. And they seem quite as happy and content if, returning, they find nothing but a clay-mark on the wall.

Later, by an hour at most, I had the Reverend by the arm, not so much to guide, as to restrain him, for he went ever a little before me through the meadow with the sure, swift stride of a mountain-goat. There was but one thing that could betray his affliction to a close observer. While I went blinking in the intolerable glory of the sunshine above us, and the scarce lesser glory of the buttercups below, he strode onward, his calm old face turned straight up to the sun, his blue eyes meeting it unflinchingly from under their shaggy arches of white. He might be Gabriel looking into the very focus of heaven, I thought, as I stole a glance at him a little fearfully. Indeed, I never quite limited his vision to that of his poor, purblind, human eyes.

‘It will be down in the little birch-clump near the Conyers,’ he said. ‘That is where the first nightingale always comes. It will take us a good five minutes, and why are you not talking to me? Come! do not keep all the brave, beautiful things to yourself!’

How to tell him of all the things I saw in a single yard of meadow about us! But I got to work with the will, if not the power.

‘We are walking,’ said I, ‘through buttercups

a foot high ; and almost with every step we send a cloud of little blue-and-copper butterflies cheyving before us. Listen to the grasshoppers piping ! The buttercups make a sort of thick scum of gold as on the surface of a green lake, Down below, like pebbles on the lake-bottom. lie the daisies—their white discs touch each other in all directions ; nay, they overlap, they are heaped upon one another. An insect might crawl over them from side to side of the great meadow and never tread on anything but daisy-white. And the dandelions ! There are millions of them, I think, filling the air with a perfume like choice old wine. And smell these, Reverend ! Do you know what they are ? ’

‘ Cowslips ! They must be in full bloom now : they were always fine cowslips in this field. But you should pull them—never pick them. Then you get all their beauty, the crimson at the base of the stem, and—— Hark ! ’

From the oak-clad hill-side to the northward, clear and slow on the gentle air, came the cuckoo’s double chime. The old vicar faced about, and took off his hat ceremoniously. I did the like. It was no superstitious greeting of the bird on its first appearance. We were not thinking even of the ancient Sussex legend—that an old witch goes to Heathfield Fair every fourteenth day of April, with all the year’s cuckoos in her bag,

and there lets them fly. On our part, it was merely a precautionary measure against a very ancient rustic pleasantry. Farmer Coles of Windlecombe loved his joke, and that was Farmer Coles's wood. Though we had no real doubt that we were listening to our first cuckoo, it was well to be on the safe side.

The path now left the full fair-way of the meadow, and meandered along by the edge of the wood. I was bidden to go on with my chronicle.

'The bluebells are out as thick as ever I saw them, Reverend. Under the shadow of the trees they look like purple smoke stealing up the hill-side; and where a bar of sunshine pierces through, the colour seems to leap into the dim air like a tongue of flame. How the rabbits play! Every moment they break cover and dart across the open spaces, two or three together. There goes a spotted woodpecker!—I saw his black-and-white coat and crimson plume as he swung through the bar of light. They are scarce here. Here comes something fitting along that I wish you could see—you know how the orange-tip——'

'The butterfly with his wings on fire? Don't grizzle over me, man! I *can* see it!—lazily looping along, though you think he will fall to earth a cinder any moment at your feet. He is

like Nero fiddling, I always think. There must be chervil growing close by.'

'Yes, a great bank of it, and the butterfly has gone.'

'Well: he is only settling there. Look how the mottled green and white on the under side of his wings, now he has closed them, exactly match the colours of the chervil. All his fire is quenched till you disturb him, and then off he goes, burning himself up as unconcernedly as ever.'

We rounded the corner of the wood, and came upon a little open stretch of heathland. The sulky sweet fragrance of the gorse so loaded the air as to make one's breath come hard. Over the gorse, linnets sang their slender, tweeting melody. The blossom-laden bushes spread away before us like great heaving waves of gold, flowing up to the hill-brow and over out of sight. Where the crests of yellow bloom stood against the sky, they made the sky a deeper blue. But between the gorse-brakes the heather showed no sign. It crouched low upon the earth, looking black and dreary and dead, as though a forest fire had lately swept by.

'Dead!' cried the Reverend scornfully. 'Turn up a frond of it, and look at the under side of the leaves. Each leaf is black above, but see how green and sappy and full of life it really is, if you

look at it aright. One misses a lot in life by taking too lofty a standpoint. The heather in April may be black to you, but it is green enough to the hiding mice.'

We went along in silence for a minute or two.

'And what about the trees?' he asked presently. 'Is it death or life there? The cuckoo never will wait for his green leaves, you know.'

'Green leaves I see, but leafage nowhere. All the wood-top is chequered into different clear zones of green, or grey, or russet, or soft sad yellow—buds bursting and leaves just promising everywhere; but leaves, as I want them, none. How slow it all is! I can understand the cuckoo's impatience. Flying all the way from Africa only to find——'

He had ceased to listen. He had turned swiftly towards the sun-bathed meadows. He put up a thin hand—blue-veined, almost transparent—against the light. He visibly started.

'I heard the throb of a wing—a new sound. It must be——'

'Yes, there it is! The first swallow! Wheeling and darting over the buttercups yonder, like a bit of bright, blue-tempered steel!'

And as I uttered the words, there drifted out of the thorn-hedge hard by us the note we had come to seek. All the ringing music of the woodland seemed to grow mute at the sound. Wild

and pure, with a force and a lingering sweetness indescribable, the nightingale's song poured out of the thicket, dwelling upon the one silver, clarion note, moment after moment, as though it would never cease. At my side two gaunt arms rose tremblingly into the sunshine :

'They are all here!'—the voice was husky, faltering—'All! all! I have heard them again, every one of them, the good God be praised! Though I never hoped to—— Yes, one by one, I bade them all a long farewell last year!'

IV

Down in the village, when I left it this morning, hardly a breath was stirring under the warm April sun; but the wind is never still for more than an hour or two, here on the top of Windle Hill. At first, there was only a gentle wayward air out of the blue south-west. But already the wind is freshening as the sun lifts; and, with the growing heat, it is sure to strengthen. Mid-day may find half a gale singing in the long grass-bents around me, the gold tassels of the cowslips lashing to and fro in the grip of a madcap breeze.

To get the true spirit of the Sussex Downs, you must become a lover of the wind, loving it in all its moods. There are rare moments, even on Windle Hill, when the sun glows in a halcyon

sky, and the blue air about you lies as still and silent as a sheltered woodland mere. But this is not true Downland weather. A calm day in the valleys may stand for tranquillity, and be well enough ; but here it savours rather of stagnation. The very life of the Downs is in their flowing, ever-changing atmosphere—the sweet pure current coming to you unwinnowed over a visible course of twenty miles. When the wind is still, it is good to keep to the lowlands, under their green canopies of whispering leaves, within sound of their purling undertone of brooks ; for the valley has its own companionable voices of earth, even under silent skies. But the Downs are as a strung harp, that will yield no music save to the touch of the one gargantuan player. Their very essence of life is in the careering air. You must learn to love the wind for its own sake, or you will never come to be a true Sussex highlander—to know what the magic is that brings Sussex men, meeting by chance in some far-off nook of the world, to talk first of all of the Downs, when, in the stifling heat of a tropic night, or by northern camp-fires, pipes are aglow, and tired hearts wistfully homing.

Out of the blue south-west comes the gentle wind, bringing with it the colour of the skies to every dell and shady woodland track in the far-spreading vista. Violet-hued the lazy cloud-

shadows creep over the hills, or travel the low-land country to the south, dimming the green of blunting corn and the rich brown of new tilth, with their own soft scrumbling of azure. Where the village lies, far below at the foot of the hill, the elm-tops seem full of green : but this is only the scale of the bygone blossom. It will all fall to earth in tiny emerald discs, each with its crimson centre, before the true abiding green of the leaf appears. In the cottage gardens—looking, from the heights, like patchwork in a quilt—the cherry-trees make snow-white wreaths and posies. The lane that leads to the hill is flanked with ancient blackthorn hedges whiter yet. Blackthorn and sloe, and bright festoons of marsh-marigold weave a dwindling pattern over the low brook-country beyond, where the grey-blue thread of Arun river winds in and out on its long journey towards the sea. And, far beyond all, glistens the sea itself—one vivid streak of blue, incredibly high in the heaven—a long broad band as though made with a single sweep of a brush charged with pure sapphire, and fretted here and there with a few scarce, dragging, crumbling touches of gold.

Swallows go by overhead in the sun-steeped air chattering pleasantly. Every bush and branch, it would seem, below in the combe, must have its singer ; for how else to account for such

a bewildering, dim babel of song? All the larks in the world, you think, must be congregated in the blue region above the hill-top, and to be giving back to the sun a dozen gay trills for every beam he squanders down. While there is daylight, there will be this incessant lark-song, here on the green pinnacle of the wind-washed hill. With the first light of dawn the merry round began: it will hardly cease with the last red glimmer of the highland evening, when, an hour before, the leaf-shrouded combe has grown silent in the blackness of night. The stars will hear the last of it then, just as they will hear again its earliest music before they are quenched by the white of morrow. And if a drab, forbidding sky lowers over everything, or the rain-clouds wrap the hills about with mist of water, still the larks will sing. Nothing daunts the little grey highland minstrel. So that there be light enough to guide him upward, he will soar and sing, carrying his music indifferently up into the glory of this perfect April morning, or the gloom of the winter torrent and whistling winter blast.

Human fret and worry have a habit of keeping to the lowlands, as all lovers of the Downs know well. You cannot climb the hill-top, and bring with you all the care that burdened your footsteps down in the dusty shadow-locked vale. Somehow or other, every stride upward over the

springy turf seems to lighten the load ; and once on the summit, you seem to have lifted head and shoulders far above the strife. The hurrying mountain freshet of a breeze singing in your ears, and the rippling lark-music, have washed the heart clean of all but gladness ; and you see with awakened eyes. You have soared with the lark, and now must needs sing with him. You cannot help looking over and onward, as he does, at the brightness that is always pressing hard on the heels of human worry and care.

It is the great wide expanses in Nature that have most effect on the hearts and lives of men. The sea has its own intrinsic influence ; but it is too fraught with echoes of old wrath and unreasoning violence, overpast yet still remembered, even in its quietest moods. You cannot forget its grim levy on human lives, and the stout ships beaten to splinters uselessly. The leviathan lies crooning, inert, under the hot April noon, all lazy benevolent gentleness ; yet you owe it many bitter grudges rightfully, and see the silken treachery lurking deep down in its placid depths. But the story of the Downs is one long tale of harmless good. They have no record of strife and disaster. Their tale of the ages is a whole philosophy of life without its terror :—Nature's great good gift to world-worn souls, the bringing of calm into human life, with calm's inherent

far-seeing ; reason working through worry towards hope and trust for the best.

The blithe spring day wears on ; the sun lifts higher and higher ; and the blue tree-shadows, that span the village down at the foot of the hill, have shrunk to half their former length. With the ripe heat of midday, the wind has freshened to a surging, roistering gale ; but its rough touch is full of kindly warmth and jollity. The cloud-shadows that, in the serener mood of the morning, crept so stealthily over hill and dale, now stride from peak to peak in a wild chevy-chase after the sunbeams ; leaping the valleys in their path, and filling them with rollicking grey and gold. The sky, with its griddle of white cloud, has come strangely near, and the Downs have risen suddenly to meet it. You seem buoyed up on an ever-lifting tide of green hills, that rock and sway as the broad bars of sun and shadow drive onward under the goad of the breeze. It is all sheer exultation—the changing light, and the song of the gale, and the lark's unceasing challenge above you. Now, of all times, you must learn how good a thing it is to be out and about on these Sussex highlands, washed in the sun and the rain and the pure salt breath of the sea.

MAY

I

SOMETIMES for days together, a whole week, perhaps, I may never set foot outside the area of the village. These are generally times when the tide of work runs high, and one must keep steadily pulling to make any real headway against it. They are days, and nights too, of necessarily close and constant application, varied, however, by odd half-hours of quiet loafing hither and thither about the village—delicious moments pilfered recklessly from the eternal grindstone of the study, to be remembered for their pipes smoked and their talks with old acquaintance at street corners, long after the labour which sweetened them has passed, maybe fruitlessly, away.

So it has happened this last week, during which the season has journeyed out of April into May. At one time or another in the chain of busy hours, I have renewed acquaintance with all my favourite bits of old Windlecombe, and the personalities from which they are inseparable.

Getting out into the sunshine, I usually find my steps turning, first of all, towards the smithy. It stands just behind the Clemmers' cottage, its yawning black doorway wreathed about with elder branches full of white blossom, and deep green spray reminding one of the foliage in old paintings, which looks as if it were compounded of indigo and gamboge. I never knew a smith who could beat out such ear-assuaging music from an anvil as young Tom Clemmer. If you hear it in passing, you are bound to turn aside, and stand for awhile looking in at the door, and fall adreaming under the spell of its quiet melody. But standing out there, with the sun across your eyes, you can see nothing at first save a sputtering red spot of fire, and hear nothing but the chime of hammer and anvil, to which the gruff, wheezy bellows add a sort of complaining undertone. When you catch sight of young Tom Clemmer, it is to make him out as one of great height, immensely broad in the shoulder and lean of hip—a peg-top figure of a man. Through the smoke and flying sparks he shows you a black face with a pair of grey eyes, deep-set, glittering, mirthful, and a great head covered with crisp flaxen curls. He is of the old South-Saxon blood through and through.

But at the wheelwright's yard, a little farther along the green, you are confronted with quite a

different breed of Sussex peasant. The Drays are thickset, of middle height; and dark, almost swarthy of feature. Up in the churchyard, you come upon the two names at every step. You read Clemmer, Dray, Dray and Clemmer, everywhere amidst the moss-grown stones, in varying degrees of illegibility back for hundreds of years. The two families are by far the oldest in Windlecombe. You note that the Clemmers were nearly always Thomases, and the Drays for the most part Daniels; while the females of both races were, and are still, either Marthas or Janes. Looking over the ranks of this silent company, it is impossible to think of any member of the former clan as other than long-limbed, grey-eyed and fair; and a Dray, even though he were a serf under Harold, who was not dark of glance and visage would be an anomaly unthinkable. Young Daniel now—as you pass by and see him bending to and fro over his cavern of a sawpit, with the red elm-dust spurting up fountain-like in the sunshine between his gaitered legs—must be the very counterpart of the Dray who, doubtless, fought at Hastings; or him of older times who, daubed in blue war-paint, might have watched with wrath and wonder from his seaside ambush the first Phœnician galley that came adventuring after Cornish tin.

When it rains, though work and the house

have for the nonce become alike intolerable, I have several havens wherein I can be sure of finding just that quiet anchorage that the moment needs. The little sweetstuff shop is foremost among them. Over the long, low window, with its curious lattice panes of bull's-eye glass, there runs a legend, in one uniform character and without stop or break:—'BERLIN WOOLS TOYS SUSAN ANGEL ALL KINDS OF SWEETS.' And within at her fireside behind the little counter, sits Miss Angel, always busily knitting, and always ready for a chat.

I reserve Miss Angel and her flute-like under-flow of small-talk, for moments of placidity. But at unruly seasons of mind, I go to the cobbler's den, and getting my elbows upon the half-door, look in upon him, often without spoken word on either side, for ten minutes at a stretch. It is dark in there, with a penetrating smell of tanned leather wonderfully soothing in certain states of the nerves. My own taciturnity is real enough at these times; but that of the cobbler, a garrulous old soul by nature, is usually forced upon him by circumstances. His mouth seems to be permanently full of brass brads, which come automatically through his closed lips one by one, and always miraculously head-first, to be ready when his quick left hand needs them. With his right hand he keeps up an incessant

monotonous tattoo on the boot between his knees ; and to watch the shining brass pins flowing from his mouth into symmetrical rows on the leather is pure balm for eyes tired of staring at paper and ink. I know the cobbler means to talk directly he has finished his mouthful. Now and again he looks up with premonitory gleams of politics or ground-bait in his eye ; or, worse still, with that slow double-wink which I know presages a story ancient even in his great-grandfather's time. So I watch the flow of the brads, and when I judge the supply to be nearly exhausted, I generally execute a stealthy retreat.

The parlour of the Three Thatchers Inn is, I know of old, an unrivalled place for the rejuvenation of a jaded faith in the reality of life, at times of idleness and dismal weather. It is not the talk of the old landlord behind his bar—talk at once serenely simple and shrewdly worldly-wise ; nor the unending volley of song from the three canaries, each in its crinoline-like cage overhead ; nor even the quality of the liquor, that draws me to this cosy, sawdust-carpeted, crimson-curtained nook. It is the furniture of the bar itself, all that stands upon its shelves and hangs upon its old wainscoted walls, that attracts me at these odd, unemployable moments—a collection of articles never to be got together, I think,

in less than four generations of like-minded men.

All the woodwork is of oak, planted, grown, and felled, no doubt, within an arrow-flight of the village. On the walls of the parlour hang various framed and coloured prints, disreputable by tradition, yet so embrowned with varnish as to be long ago relegated into harmless indecipherability. There is a picture of a bird of dubious species, from whose open beak issue the words—*'As a bird is known by his song, so is a man by his conversation.'* Opposite the door, where all entering must immediately observe it, hangs another picture, this time of a dog lying upon its back with all four legs rigidly pointing upwards, and a very long red tongue lolling out of its mouth; and, underneath, the inscription—*'Poor Trust is dead: bad pay killed him.'*

Behind the bar, the walls are lined with shelves, backed up by scrolled looking-glass, wherein all the treasures that crowd before it have their blurred and distorted counterparts. On the uppermost shelves, hard against the smoke-blackened ceiling, stand rows of pewter-pots, kept scrupulously clean and bright, but never taken down for use within living memory. Below these is a regiment of cut-glass bottles in different rich colours, quaintly fluted, each with a gilt vine-leaf upon it; and between the bottles

stand inverted wine-glasses, every one upon a little mat of gaudy wool, and balancing a lemon upon its upturned foot. Other shelves are taken up with toby-jugs, curious old snuff-boxes and tobacco-jars, row upon row of earthenware mugs, ringed with brown and blue, and stamped with a mysterious ornament like black seaweed. There are three large wooden kegs with brass taps, marked respectively with the letters—O. T., J. R., and C. B. The local pleasantry has it that these are needed to store the special liquor of three devoted patrons of the inn. The ferryman and Bleak the cobbler reject the insinuation with contumely; but O. T., as I have the best of all reasons for knowing, regards it as a compliment of subtle hue.

But perhaps the most fascinating item in the whole collection is a certain ancient puzzle-mug of blue crockery-ware, with a suspiciously heavy handle and an elaborately perforated lip. A stranger is invited to drink from this, but, by reason of the open lattice-work all round the rim, it appears an impossible feat. The trick, however, is easy to one in the secret. The handle of the cup is hollow, and communicates with the interior at its lowest extremity. By setting the mouth to a small hole in the handle-top, the liquor can be slowly sucked through.

II

It being the day of the fortnightly market at Stavisham, and the weather fair, Runridge and I took the little green punt from its moorings this afternoon, and set out to explore the Long Back-Reach.

The Reach is just a winding side-alley of the river, overgrown with willows and reeds—a mere crevice of glimmering water hiding itself in the heart of the wood. Coming into it from the dazzling sunlight of the main river, it strikes at first almost chill and gloomy, for all it is an afternoon in May. But this is only an illusion that soon passes. After a minute or two you get its quiet keynote; the green dusk becomes deliciously tempered sunlight, the cool air something finer and more delicate than the sun-scorched breath of the open river-way.

Runridge pulls a long clean stroke, and dips his oar-blades with a perfect rhythm. He is silent company, as far as words go; but he has an eloquence of look and gesture which more than takes the place of speech. And there is something about his mute system of comradeship that irresistibly impels itself on others. With his tanned, wrinkled face sedately smiling under the brim of his battered old felt hat, and his thoughtful eyes for ever roaming over the

landscape, you feel that the ordinary human method of conveying ideas by sounds is somehow out of place in the little green wherry. Over and over again to-day, when a scarce bird or uncommon flower showed itself on the river bank, and I would direct his notice thither, I found myself insensibly adopting his silent way of a waved hand or an inclination of the head, when, in other company, my tongue would have been set agoing on the instant with less sufficing words.

Out on the broad water-way the tide was still running up, but here in the Long Back-Reach the drift of the current was hardly perceptible. The old ferryman had laid by his oars, and now sat filling an ancient pipe with tobacco that looked like chips of ebony. As for me, I lay back in the boat, head pillowed on clasped hands, dimly recalling a dream I had had, ages and ages back, of a world without green leaves or nightingales—a weirdly impossible world of nipping frost and firesides, the sob of the winter wind, and the dreary deluge of winter rain.

The reeds stood high on either hand: above, the old yellow reeds, with their nodding mauve-grey plumes, and below, the fresh green growth, wherein the reed-warblers would soon be building—a living emerald thronging up amidst the old dead stems. Over the solid rampart of the reeds the willows reached down, trailing their

ferny branches in the water. And beyond these, the great forest trees hemmed us in, oak and elm and beech in two vast cliffs of verdure towering above us, and interlocking their laden boughs against the far blue sky.

The little sugar-scoop of a boat drifted on. Everywhere about us the martins were skimming over the clear water, chattering as they went. The seeding willows sent down tiny flecks of white, that hovered and dwelt in the dim air, like snow-flakes ; and from the beeches overhead there was a constant rain of light fine atoms, the discarded sheaths of the leaf-buds, that fell upon the waters and gathered into all the little nooks and bays among the reeds like pale, dun foam.

Somewhere far in the distance a cuckoo sang. Runridge took his pipe from his mouth, and gave it a rocking motion. Never a word he said, but his thought passed to me just as if he had spoken it : a see-saw melody it was, and will be until the hay is down. There were willow-wrens singing far above in the tree-tops. A chiff-chaff went looping by with his soft, broken note. To count the nightingales that we heard as the boat stemmed onward were almost to count the white-budded hawthorns that shone out through every gap in the reeds. And now the old ferryman put out an oar, and turned the

little craft towards the bank, where a great willow-tree drooped half across the stream. The boat-prow clove its way into the heart of this leafy shelter, and we came to rest. The pipe went up warningly. In the dense reed thicket hard by there was a new maytide song.

Of all utterances of wild birds, perhaps none attains to a human-like quality more nearly than that of the sedge-warbler. It is not so much a song as a continuous complaint, and that of a characteristically feminine kind. To me the little sedge-bird, restlessly flitting from stem to stem through the waving jungle of reeds, and singing as she goes, inevitably suggests a type of dutiful, laborious womanhood, all affection and unselfishness, but ever ready alike with sharp words and an aggressive tearfulness that disarms as completely as it maddens. And the sweetness, the occasional sudden bright abandon of the song only serves to strengthen the comparison. You can picture the bird stopping in the midst of her most fretful, self-commiserate strain, bravely to estimate her compensations. The sun shines, the nest is well-built and furnished, the larder easy to be filled. Material good is un lacking; but— And then the singer goes hopelessly under again. Now the song is nothing but sweetly lachrymose expostulation, voiced grief all the more intolerable

for its tunefulness,—an epic of melodious woe.

Turning over in my mind this fantasy about the sedge-bird, as we lingered under the willow bower, I found the old ferryman looking at me with a strangely reminiscent eye. It flashed across me that long ago, when all days were as good as market days to us, I had put before him just these thoughts, and had received his silent, amused concurrence in them. Then there had been no chance of inconvenient application; but now—I sat bolt upright and looked closer at him. I was beaten at this talk of eyes. I harked back to the old safe path with which I was familiar. He had turned away now, and did not revert his glance though my hand was upon his arm.

‘Why, *why* did you do it, Runridge?’ I blurted out, almost as forlornly as the sedge-bird. ‘You never minded living alone! You were happy enough! And I—I——’

He was looking at me straightly enough now.

‘Do it?’ His breath whistled in through his set teeth. ‘Do it—did ye say? I do it?—never! ‘A did it hersel’! Kind o’ mesmerised, I wur. Never rightly knowed as ‘twur done, till ‘twur all ower. But there ‘tis i’ th’ book, an’ no gettin’ ower it now. Ah! well, well! purty near time we was skorkin’ hoame-along,

bean't it? Gie tired women-folk a could kettle for welcome, an' 'tis trouble wi'out end.'

III

Whitsuntide has fallen early this year, and that seems to me always the fittest thing. It should come, as it has come now, at the full fair tide of the spring, when the apple-blossom, last ebullition of the year's youth, is at the zenith of its glory, and summer is still only a promise yet to be fulfilled.

Whitsunday in Windlecombe, to all average folk, at least, excels in importance every other day in the year, Christmas Day alone excepted. There is neither man, woman, nor child in the parish, with the ability to get to church, but arrives there somehow and sometime during the day. For the old vicar, from his early communion service to the time he gives the benediction at close of evensong, it is a day of ceaseless action and exaltation. Every Whitsunday—when, in fulfilment of an ancient compact between us, I go to the vicarage to share the last light of day with him alone—I find him sitting in the little summer-house at the foot of the garden, radiantly happy, yet tired as a navigator, and hoarse as a crow. What befalls the curate at the end of this arduous day no one knows; for

he is never visible after the final service. But Miss Sweet is said to pervade the neighbourhood of his lodging like an unquiet ghost far into the twilight, waylaying his housekeeper with offers of night-socks and eau-de-cologne.

On this fine Whitsunday morning I got to my corner in the grey old church earlier than my wont, before, indeed, the bell began its measured tolling. The school children were in their places in the south aisle, a whispering, nudging crew. The curate flitted about the chancel in his long black cassock like a bat disturbed from its dreams. The little organist sat at her harmonium. No one else as yet had come to church.

It was good to sit thus in the cool and quiet before the service began, letting the heart go back over all the other Whitsuntides I had spent in Windlecombe, and letting the eye rove here and there through the hollow, sun-barred twilight of the old place, comparing the garlands that beautified it now with those that, in former years, had registered the attained prosperity of the season. For though, wherever you looked, from the window-ledges of the sanctuary to the multi-centred arch of the west door, there were flowers and greenery in profusion, no garden blossom shone amongst them. They were all wildflowers. Every child, most of the women, and many of the men, who could spare an hour from work the

day before, had been busy in the woods and fields to make this House Beautiful. The old vicar's ambition was known to all—that in the church to-day every wild Maytide blossom should have its place. I looked hither and thither, but could think of none that was missing. The altar was golden with cowslips, primroses, buttercups, every flower that bore the colour of gold. Bluebells hid the old oak carving of the pulpit, and with them others that were blue or purple, violet and veronica, forget-me-not and pimpernel. On all the window-ledges, not to vie with the richness of the painted glass, white flowers alone were assembled—chervil and elder, daisies that are snow-white in the mass, sprays of silver stitchwort, wreaths of hawthorn entwining all. The chancel screen was hung with festoons of pink herb-robert and deadnettle; and the steps beneath it flanked with those wild growths that bear greenish flowers as well as green leaves—the woodspurge and the paler green of arum and bryony. No colour was crowded unthinkingly upon another. Each blossom held by its kinsfolk of a like complexion, and a hundred forms and shades of verdure underflowed them all. Gladly I marked that there were no roses anywhere, and this it was that gave the day its special meaning. Last year I remembered how the wild dog-roses lorded it over everything, making

Whitsun a summer feast, which it never should be. But this year we are weeks in front of the roses and the may is scarce half-blown.

Now the bell commenced its slow rhythmic chime, and in the south porch, where the surplices hung, the choir boys began to assemble. The west door stood open, and, mingling with the songs of the birds and the joyous note of the wind in the trees, footsteps sounded on the churchyard path. At first they came singly, then in twos and threes. After awhile their shuffling note became continuous, and the church began to fill on all sides. I could no longer look about me, but must sit straight in my pew, contenting myself with rare side glances. I heard the stump of old Tom Clemmer's crutches afar off in the street, heard it grow gradually louder and nearer, until it ceased on the floor of the pew behind me, and Clemmer set himself to subdue the hurricane of his breath. Mrs. Runridge fluttered up the aisle, with the tall old ferryman so close behind her, and his head so decorously lowered, that he seemed to be regaling himself with the smell of the roses in her new bonnet as they went. Farmer Coles and his retinue arrived, blocking the aisle for a full minute, until hot and flurried Mrs. Coles, by much pointing and nudging, and a hubbub of whispered directions, had succeeded in packing all her family into the two great pews.

With astonishing suddenness the erstwhile empty church had become a crowded building. All Windlecombe was there, every woman or girl in her new Whitsuntide bonnet and gay new cotton frock.

And now the bell stopped ; a few late stragglers came hurrying up the path, and into the rustling silence of the church with but half-restrained momentum ; a sonorous Amen came from the south porch ; the little harmonium uplifted its voice afar off in the chancel ; the white-robed choristers began to pour up the nave, singing as they went ; the curate followed, and last of all the old vicar, as upright as any, with his sure, unflinching stride. No stranger, seeing him keep the true centre of the way, and pass unhesitatingly to his desk in the chancel, would have dreamed that he walked in almost utter darkness ; nor when he faced about, and began the service with that deep-toned serene voice of his, did any one of us believe it, though we had known him all our lives. Not a word halted, not a word went awry. Only when the time for the Bible lessons came did he give place to his helper ; and even at these times we were not always delivered over to the sad-voiced, diffident curate. How much of the Bible he knew by heart not even he himself could say ; but often he would come down to the lectern, and with a face of inspiration turned

upon us, recite the whole lesson as though he who wrote it ages back stood whispering at his side. Many a time, as he ceased, and turned back to his chancel seat with unerring step, and every man fetched his breath in the silence, I have marvelled at the force of habit that, when all hearts were inwardly exclaiming, could hold us mute of voice.

The same thought came to me when, a little later, he stood in the pulpit, his deep tones rumbling in the rafters over our heads; and most of all it pressed itself upon me when, at close of the long service, I beheld him afar off in the radiant flower-garden of the sanctuary, a towering white figure, with arm uplifted, nebulous, uncertain, in the multitudinous lights. But, with the thought, came always a kind of fear, a sensation that we were all living recklessly outside our defences, going our ways like children sheltered, aided, and irresponsible:—what would happen to Windlecombe, and to us all, when the strong arm failed and the voice no longer guided? At these times my comfort was always in a word of Susan Angel's, spoken with a cheery, quiet conviction from behind her rows of sweetstuff bottles and knick-knack trays. With her young, almost girlish eyes shining out of her crabbed, ancient face, she pointed a knitting-needle at me for emphasis.

'Depend on 't, my dear,' said she, 'a wunt goo far, when th' call comes. Him as has christened, an' married, ay! an' buried well-nigh all i' th' place, an' been more 'n a faather to us, what 'ud 'a be doin' aloane up there i' the skies? Na, na! Man or sperit, 'a belongs to Windlecombe. Here 'a's treasure be, an' here 'a 'll bide.'

IV

I heard a weird, tom-toming somewhere in the village to-day, and going forth, soon tracked the sound down to cobbler Bleak's garden that lay at the far end of the green.

The old man was ringing his bees. Through a gap in the hawthorn hedge, I could see him standing under his apple-trees surrounded by the hives, and beating on a saucepan with a door-key, while the air above was alive with flashing wings, and resonant with the high shrill music of the swarm. This was the first swarm of the season, although it was well on in May. Most of the Windlecombe folk kept a few hives in some odd nook or other of the garden, and these were nearly all of the ancient straw pattern. He who could get the earliest swarm was accounted at once the luckiest and most astute of beemen; and the old cobbler's face glowed with

pride through its encircling fringe of ragged white hair and whisker, as he pounded away with his key, never doubting for a moment that the noise would soon induce the swarm to settle.

But the bees were in no hurry to end this one mad frolic of their laborious lives. They rose higher and higher into the blue air and sunshine, drifting to all parts of the compass in turn. They veered out far over the roadway; swept back towards the cottage, hovering awhile like a grey cloud over the chimney-tops; took an indecisive turn round the next garden; re-appeared in their old station above the orchard, as little inclined as ever, apparently, to make a permanent halt. And all the time their high tremulous music burdened the air, every dog in the village barked, and every goose quacked its sympathy, and the old cobbler beat steadily on his pan.

I got my elbows comfortably into the gap in the hedgerow, the better to enjoy the scene. The garden was completely surrounded by the hawthorn-hedge, a glowing wreath of white, against which shone masses of blooming lilac and laburnum and red garden-may. The little cottage at the back of the shop stood up to its window-sills in bright colour, every old-fashioned flower crowding about it. The winding red-tiled paths ran between borders of the same rich living hues. And beyond in the orchard, splashed over

with blue-grey shadows and quivering gold, as the sunshine filtered through the leaves, were innumerable hives, old-fashioned skeps of straw, each with its little chanting company of bees.

The old cobbler spied me in the hedgerow gap, and beckoned me to join him. He was without hat or coat, and wore his leather apron. A half-mended boot thrown down on the path showed how hastily he had been summoned from work. As I came up, he managed somehow to extract from the saucepan an exultant, almost jeering tune.

' Ah, ha ! ' cried he, blinking up at his whirligig property, ' can ye show th' like o' that 'n ?—you as keeps bees in patent machines ? Naun like straw, there be ; as I allers telled ye ! These yere new-fangled boxes !—ye 'll ha' ne'er a swarm this side o' Corp Christian, I 'll lay a pot o' six ! '

It wanted still four or five days to the date of the great Roman festival of Corpus Christi in Stavisham, which annually drew all village sight-seers from far and near. I reflected sadly, and rather shamefacedly, that not only was a swarm from my modern, roomy frame-hives little to be expected during that interval, but that it was the last thing I had hitherto desired. Working at home among my trim, up-to-date hives, with all the latest scientific methods in apiculture at my finger-tips, it seemed a fine thing to possess bees

that had almost forgotten how to swarm, and that could bring me in a double or treble harvest of honey. But here in the beautiful old beegarden, I began dimly to perceive another side to the argument. Whether courage or ignorance had led him to resist the tide of progress in beekeeping that has all but engulfed this gentlest, most picturesque of village crafts, the old cobbler might be right after all. My honey was better and more abundant than his ; but it might well be dear at the price.

The swarm was coming lower now, and the wildly flying bees closing their ranks. Above our heads the air grew dark with them. It was plain that they would soon be settling. Of a sudden the clanging key-music ceased. Bleak pointed triumphantly to a bough in a tree hard by. A little knot of bees had fastened there, no bigger than a clenched fist. But as I looked it doubled its size with every moment. From all the regions of sunny air above us the bees thronged towards the cluster. In a short five minutes hardly one remained on the wing ; and in place of the wild trek-song, a dull, uncanny silence held the air. From the drooping apple-bough the whole multitude hung together in a dark brown mass, looking strangely like a huge cigar, as it swayed idly to and fro in the gentle breeze.

And now the old cobbler went about the work of hiving the swarm in the old way, punctiliously observing all the traditional rites of the craft. A jar of ale was brought out, from which we must both drink, to sweeten our breath for the coming ceremony. Then, having washed his hands, Bleak set about the dressing of the hive. It was a new skep, one of many he had himself made during the long winter evenings bygone. He gathered first a handful of mint and balm and lavender, and with this he carefully scrubbed out the skep. Then he made a syrup of brown sugar and beer, wherewith he gave the hive a second thorough dressing. Finally, having cut two or three leafy boughs of elder, he took the skep with its baseboard under his arm, and approached the swarm on tiptoe and with bated breath.

The bees hung in the sunshine, as silent, as inert as ever; except that a dozen or so were hovering about the cluster, humming a drowsy song. The note contrasted oddly with the wild merry music of the flying swarm, when all had seemed mad with excitement, as though they were setting forth on some fierce neck-or-nothing adventure, instead of the rather tame business in which they were at present absorbed.

The old beeman stepped warily towards them,

and holding the skep mouth upwards beneath the cluster, gave the branch a vigorous shake. Like so many blackcurrants, the entire mass of bees rattled down into the hive, when the base-board was swiftly clapped over them, and the whole inverted and placed upon the ground. Waiting a minute or two, the old man then gently raised one edge of the skep, and propped it up with a stone. A few hundred bees came tumbling out with a sound like the boiling-over of a cauldron; but the greater part of the swarm remained within the hive. Before half an hour had passed, they had completely accepted the situation, and the worker-bees were lancing busily off in all directions in search of provender for the new home.

The old cobbler's prediction that I should have no swarm by Corpus Christi, fell true enough. Every day I watched until the hours for swarming had passed by eventlessly. And then, on the great Stavisham feast-day, in the sunny calm of afternoon, I followed the straggling line of sightseers by the river-way to the town.

v

A hush is over the little precipitous market-town. The hot May sun beats down on the waiting lines of people, on the fragrant linden-

trees shading the quiet street, on the fluttering banners and pennants everywhere.

The air is full of dim sound ; wild drift of far-off bell-music, the deep hum and stir of the expectant people, the voice of the wind, sweet and low, in the green lime labyrinth overhead. Every glance is turned up the street, where the church of Saint Francis of Assisi lifts its bluff sandstone tower against the blue. The great west door stands open. Straining the eye, the nearest watchers can just make out a glint of altar lights through the cavernous dark within—the rich uncertain glow of candles given back from a thousand gleaming points of silver chalice and golden cross and glittering filigree.

And now the last rumbling harmony of the organ dies away. For a moment a deeper silence than ever fills the Gothic gloom. Then the thin fine note of a clarinet lifts up its trembling signal in the darkness. The brazen trombones join in with their passionate, deep-voiced music. The lights begin to move and dance, growing nearer and stronger. 'They are coming!'—to the remotest end of the waiting line the whisper spreads.

Slowly the procession winds its way through the great church door, and down the precipitous street. First the gilded, jewel-encumbered cross, borne aloft by a young priest in a black cassock and snowy, deep-laced surplice. Then the sing-

ing multitude of schoolgirls, all in white, with wreath-crowned veils like so many Lilliputian brides. Now the boys from the convent seminary in crimson shoulder-sashes, with their fussing marshals; and the elder women after, in their doleful, decorous black. Banners swaying; rainbow streamers flying; the shrill child-voices blent with the sound of the wind in the glad green leaves overhead.

Now the trumpets and clarinets have turned the bend of the street. The singing gives way to deeper music. More banners come flinging and flaunting into the sunny vista. The gay procession takes on a darker tinge. Sisters in black, sisters in brown, sisters in grey; weary faces, sad faces, comely faces; winter and glowing spring and ripe calm autumn, all in the same cold livery of sorrow, all with the like abandonment to destiny so plainly fettering the innate unrule of will.

The musicians pass on: the deep blurring melody fades: the pageant changes.

Monks and friars now. An old Capuchin father totters by in his rough brown frock, carrying a candle on a brazen stick. After him a score of his own degree, all bearing lights that glimmer and blink superfluously in the sunshine, and all chanting a long slow antiphon in a minor key. Old men reeking of the cloister, bent nearly

double with their weight of years ; sturdy young friars, ruddy-jowled, tonsured, with only half an eye to their book ; suave-faced, grey-headed superiors, eyes in the sky, calm, transfigured, the vanquished world behind every man's broad back.

And now a weird, dirge-like note creeps down the sun-bathed street, and a murmur follows it through the craning, nudging crowd. The end, the crown, of the pageant is suddenly in view. It is all shining celestial white now, as the choristers sweep slowly by in their spotless lawn and lace, chanting their pseudo-requiem as they move. Behind them a bevy of major priests, of comfortable figure, gorgeously caparisoned. Little scarlet-robed acolytes walking backwards and strewing the way with rich-hued flowers ; swinging censers vouchsafing their hallow of dim smoke upon the common air. And then at last—under the great square baldacchino—the old Roman bishop himself, holding aloft the precious monstrance, like a glittering captive star.

A vision now of billowing white and gold ; and the low, sad chant swelling, falling ; and the languorous fragrance of the incense and the trampled flowers. Wrapped to the eyes in his heavy, gilt-encrusted cope, the old priest grasps his cherished burden with all the little might of his trembling blue-veined hands. His eyes are on the gold-rayed treasure-casket, held but an

inch or two beyond his flushed, illuminated face. A trance-like stupor seems to be upon him as he moves, guided on either side by those other two, almost as splendidly robed as himself, who keep a grip on the fringe of his silken coat, and lead him onward in his passionate ecstasy, treading thin air, enrapt, magnificent with other-worldly light.

It is over now. The great canopy has moved on, its bearers keeping ceremonious step and step. More richly accoutred priests follow in a holy rear-guard. Then the crowd closes up eagerly behind, and surges after them, bare-headed, jostling together; catching now and again a phrase of the mournful melody, and giving it an echo that sobs away into silence far in the sunny length of the street.

As I stand apart, here in the deep shadow of the convent wall, the thronging multitude sweeps by, growing thinner with every moment. The gleaming star of the monstrance sends back a last clear flash of sunlight as it turns the distant foot of the hill. Soon the straggling human fringe of the procession vanishes after it. A debris of blossom litters the long deserted way. Flags and streamers wave their bright hues over the dusty solitude. The street is forsaken, quiet again; save for the bells in the upper air, and the wind in the trees.

JUNE

I

THIS morning, for the first time in the year, I found myself unconsciously taking the shady side of the way. It was a small thing, truly; but it stood as an index of something great, perhaps the most portentous thing that happens annually in the life of him who is a countryman at heart and not merely by name. Summer had come in. It was not only that the calendar told me the month was June. I felt it in the sunbeams, saw it in the hedgerows and trees, read it in the pure azure of the summer sky. I took the shady side of the lane unthinkingly, and laughed because I did it;—not that I laughed for that alone, but because gladness was welling up within me unbidden, irresistible: I laughed for the same reason that the nightingale sang in the green brier-thicket hard by.

I stopped to listen to the song. It was June, and the nightingales would not be singing much longer. Perhaps in a week's time, at the worst,

their music would be done. I silenced my foot-fall in the long grass by the wayside, and crept up close to the nightingale's bower.

Every year a nightingale came to this brier-bush, and sang there as she was singing now. The hedge was a very old one, lifting its dense green barrier ten feet or more against the sunny southern sky ; and, in all the years I could recall, the brier-bush had never been without its nightingale. This one must have her nest close by, where all her ancestors must have built their nests, for how many generations back, who can say ? The life of this old hedge, towering far above me, and nearly as broad as it was high, could not be compassed by a man's life. It was thick and tall when the oldest in the village was but a child. At long irregular intervals of years it had been trimmed, cut back ; but the growth of the gnarled old stems, where they sprang from the ground, had not been checked. There its age stood recorded ; and it would be little wide of the truth to think of it as already thick and tall, already the traditional singing-place of this race of nightingales, a full hundred years ago.

The brier-bush stood on the shady side of the way. The nightingale had her perch in the sunshine beyond, so that the song filtered down to me through the tangle of intervening leaves.

And yet it was not so much a song as a detached, occasional reverie on the summer's morning. There is always this about the music of the summer migrant birds. They are creatures of eternal sunshine. Their life is no give-and-take of good and evil, like that of the birds who stay with us all the year through. They have no need to hearten themselves with memories of bygone sunbeams, to bring brightness from within when all without is lowering and grey. Wisely following the sun about the world from season to season, they ensure for themselves that the joy they sing of is never a memory, but always the expression of the moment's living fact: they have but to turn the vision, the aspect of the hour, into its equivalent of music.

More than all, you see this truth exemplified in the songs of chaffinch and willow-wren, which are so much alike in form, yet so strangely different in the spirit. The hardy chaffinch began his bubbling, rollicking song with the first warm day in March, and it was more than half a fiction: to-day it has the same hard, set quality, like a petrified laugh in the woods. But the little willow-wren is the slave of no long habit of pretences. She has followed the sun from the south, keeping up with his youth; and now, from the glowing wood-top, she sends down her slender echo of chaffinch music, as if,

though she would fain be silent, she must sing for very joy of the light. There is in it all the verve and gaiety of the chaffinch, yet infinitely softened and etherealised. And the long bowling phrase is never finished : it falls away and fails in the end, as if the singer suddenly realised her impotence to convey in melody one fraction of the morning's loveliness and light.

Invisible through the dense tangle of the brier-bush, to me a voice and nothing more, the nightingale sat in her nook on the sunny side of the hedgerow, pouring out her song on the already song-burdened morning as a gilder lays gold upon gold. All its sweetness, its wild purity, its slow, sorrowful strength, and its sudden overtripping, overmastering joy, drifted out upon the sunshine of the meadow, the varied phrases coming turn and turn about with long intervening silences, as though the singer ruminated on all the beauty before her, and unconsciously sang her thoughts aloud. It was good to stand there in the cool shade, and listen, and take the facts of the thronging meadow life and colour beyond the hedgerow at such tuneful second-hand. But at length the nightingale put such a call, such an insistence into her music, as sent me to the meadow-gate a little way down the lane, just to see with my own eyes what manner of beauty could be to her so great an inspiration. Shading my eyes

with my hands, I looked out over the mowing-grass, and thanked God it was June.

Knee-deep, almost, the grass stood under the morning sun ; intensely green below, and above, white with the white of countless marguerites; and, higher still, rich rose-red with myriads of tremulous sorrel-plumes. A little way over the meadow, the green of the grass-blades was lost, and the eye saw only the white of the great moon-daisies, and the sorrel-red. Farther still, these two merged into one surface of formless pink, upon which the breath of the slow western air drew a rippling pattern like watered silk.

I passed through the gate, and waded into the grass to the farthest limit of the oak-shadow. All round the meadow these shadows lay upon the mowing-grass, blue and cool in the universal glare. It mattered nothing which way the sunshine fell. The green oak-boughs stretched out so far and so low that there was shadow beneath them everywhere. Just where I stood there was a patch of poor and stony soil. The tall-growing plants had shunned it, leaving it a little haven where the unconsidered trifles could see sunshine and flourish in their little might. Faced with the rich bewilderment of summer growth, a spot like this offers irresistible attraction. To look for long on great magnificence unwearied is a power not given to all. I know with what relief and

pleasure, in other times, I have turned my back on snow-pinnacled mountains and soothed dazed eyes with a spot of grey-green lichen on a common stone. And now I turned from the boundless meadow radiance before me as from glory intolerable, and knelt to look awhile at the tiny, creviced beauties that lay among the clods.

There were scarlet pimpernel and lily-bind, gold-eyed cinquefoil and blue veronica—a score of nameless atoms starring the drab bare soil. Stooping lower, I noticed what I had never marked before—how the red of the pimpernel was centred with a crimson heart; crimson and scarlet—the military colours that I had always thought execrable, because unnaturally blended—here they were brought together, justified by the infallible artistry of the sun. The veronica seemed all pure cobalt blue as I stood gazing down upon it; but, looked at closely, each minute flower revealed a complication of colour. The blue of its petals was not a simple tint throughout, but was striped with a darker blue down in the cup. From its centre of sulphur-yellow three spires uprose, the one rich purple, the other two of a pale mauve. And, as if this were not enough beauty for so small a thing, the slender stalk upon which each blossom trembled was a shaft of delicate, translucent crimson, feathered over with white.

The cinquefoil was just as minutely wonderful in its way. Studded with little flat golden blossoms, its ferny growth mingled everywhere with the other rich-hued things, but it held itself aloof from them all. Even under the full noon-tide sun it preserved its chilly, star-like quality. Its pale silvery fronds seemed to quench the very sunbeams as they fell, and to make a cold spot on the earth in the midst of all the glowing soaring meadow-colour, like frost in fire. Many a time, in former years, I had looked at the cinquefoil thus, and marvelled at the ice-cold virtue of a thing that could so repel the fierce Tarquin of a summer sun. Nursing the fancy, I would grant it nothing at length but a senseless chastity done up in silver paper; as zealously guarded as little worth. But now I took the pains to pluck a few of its flowers, and discovered something new about it, something that raised its value to me a hundredfold. In all the meadow there was scarce another blossom with so sweet a scent; it was like the may, but at once more poignant and delicate. And, thinking of the may, I straightway forgot all about the cinquefoil, and turned to wander along the hedge.

The time had gone by when the hawthorn overran all the country-side with its billows of white blossom. These blinding masses of white—snow-white and cold as snow—are wonderful to look

upon for a moment or two ; but to me the hawthorn is always more lovely at the beginning, and, most of all, towards the end of its flowering life. At neither of these times is it really white. The new-opened blossom of the may is full of pink anthers that, in the aggregate, colour the whole bush. At this hour, for it is no more than an hour, the hawthorn-hedge is besieged by hordes of honey-sippers ; hive-bees for the most part, but also every insect that can fly. Each flower keeps its rosy blush only so long as it remains unfertilised ; and then colour and song forsake it together. The full-blown hedges of hawthorn have nothing for the ear, as they have little abiding solace to the eye.

But now again, as I roved along the narrow green way between the hedgerow and the tall grass of the meadow, the may, as of old, was beautiful to look upon. The pink anthers were dead, brown, shrivelled in their drained chalices ; but the petals themselves, as they faded, had taken upon themselves a rich flush—the hectic of decay. Everywhere the hedgerow was wreathed and posied with this soft tint, the colour of old-rose. It was the colour of death, and that was often gay and bright enough, I knew. It seemed an ill thing wherein to delight on such a brave June morning. But the truth stuck fast in the mind, for all that : these festoons of

dying may were nearly as beautiful as the best that youth and life could show.

Nearly—yet as I wandered on, creeping from bay to bay of green shadow, and edging round the great jutting promontories of hedgerow-growth, I came at once upon a sight and a sound that brought me to a more wondering halt than ever. It was my brier-bush again, and the nightingale was still singing, as I had heard her from the lane an hour ago. But now I no longer stood outside her concert-hall. I was here with her on the meadow side of her bower, and understood at last the full import of her singing. While on the shaded northern flank of the hedge there was nothing but greenery, here, on the sunny side, the brier-sprays were putting forth antlered buds, and one of them, close to my hand, had opened into the perfect flower. It was the first wild rose. If I had been Rip van Winkle, there and then waking from an age-long sleep, I should have known the day of the month, almost the very hour. Rarely, six days of June may pass in southern England, but never a seventh, without this master-sign of summer. Though storm and chill hold back the music of the migrant birds, they cannot daunt the English roses.

II

A stranger observant of trifles, coming into Windlecombe any time during early summer, might note one common feature of the place, not remarkable at other seasons. All the garden-gates were kept carefully closed ; and all houses abutting on the street had their doors either shut altogether, or replaced by low boards or fence-bars. Even the gate of the churchyard, open day and night at other times, was now closed as heedfully as any ; and, more curious still, the entrance to the inn, where there were no children to come wandering out and none dare intrude, was as cautiously barred as the rest.

Plainly these obstructions were not set up against absconding babies, for the tiniest of them was invariably out-of-doors playing in the dust of the street. And yet there was no other visible explanation of the phenomenon. It was a puzzle of a mildly interesting kind, giving just that gentle spur needed by the tired brain of a citizen holiday-maker, escaped into villagedom for awhile, and lolling there, genially, yet rather contemptuously, agape at the silence and sloth of country things.

But if tide and weather served, any moment of the day might bring the desired solution of the mystery. From afar over the hills, a deep low

clamour would begin to invade the songful village quiet. Then, on the crest of the nearest hilltop, a column of white dust would suddenly spurt up against the blue, and spread slowly downwards, marking the winding course of the lane as with smoke from a travelling fire. Now by degrees the tumult would grow louder and deeper, revealing itself at last as the hoarse medley of voices from a flock of sheep; a flock so vast that, while the first ewes were already charging into the village, the last ones had not yet breasted the top of the hill.

There would be no doubt now of the wisdom of the gate-shutting policy. Any of these that by chance had remained open, would be hastily clapped to; and all about him the stranger would see the children scramble into corners, and mount upon doorsteps out of the way of the tornading host. He himself, indeed, would be glad to take shelter in the nearest doorway, where he could look on at a spectacle, stirring even to a nature dulled by the din of a town.

Now the hoarse note has swelled to a veritable hurricane of sound. The whole village bids fair to be submerged and swept away by an avalanche of wool. In the forefront marches a shepherd-boy, straw knapsack on back and blue cotton umbrella under arm. Behind him the street is packed with the jostling, vociferating crowd of

sheep, a solid mass of woolly life extending as far as eye can penetrate the cloud of dust. At intervals in the throng walk the under shepherds, each with his dog, all—dogs and men—adding their voices to the general uproar. And at the end of the procession, when at length it has stormed its way past, comes the master-shepherd, a figure shadowy, indistinct in the dust-laden air; nothing certain about him but the glint of the sun on his crook, and his easy, hearty replies to the shouted greetings of old acquaintance by the way.

Every day in June, while the tides last, and there is water enough in the river for the work of sheep-washing, these great flocks pour through Windlecombe, some of them coming from lonely farmsteads miles away over the Downs. To-day it was the Ambledown wash, one of the largest of the year; and when the sheep had gone through, and the dust had cleared from the sunshine, I set off myself, in oldest garb and thickest boots, to join the string of onlookers drifting from all parts of the village towards the washing-creek. But on these sheep-wash days, there is much more to do than look on at one of the most fascinating and exhilarating sights in all the round of farm work. A helping hand from every man used to the task is alike expected and freely given as a point of honour

at these times. Each of us has his favourite wash, in which, as a matter of old custom, he takes his share of the heat and burden of the day; and to me, when Ambledown's turn comes round, is given, now by old-established and hard-won right, the long crook by the plunge.

As life journeys on, we tend to make ever less and less of our rare moments of swelling pride and self-satisfaction, or even to abrogate them altogether. But on this one day of the year, when I exchange a less noble tool for the long crook at Ambledown sheep-wash, and feel the cares of my office gathering upon me, I go back nearer to the child's pure joy in a paper cocked-hat and tin epaulettes than at any other moment of my life. If you have never stood wide-legged, like a ship-captain in a gale, on a rickety hurdle six feet above a chaos of swirling, glittering water, crowded with the bobbing heads of sheep, your charge being not only to keep each ewe swimming down the wash to the tubmen, but to sustain a constant watch on the weaklings and prevent them drowning—you have never known responsibility's true zest. Picture to yourself an old chalk-quarry on the river's brink, long disused and abandoned to every form of wild life—a shy, green place overgrown with brier and bramble, merged at all other times of the year in eternal quiet, but now the scene of brisk

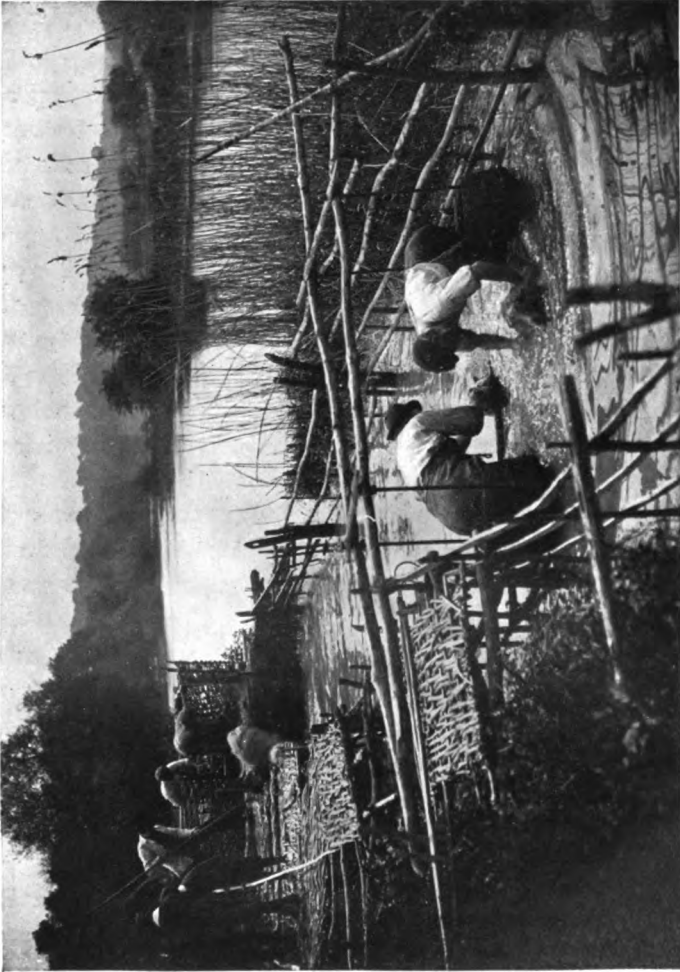
activity, crowded with busy folk and innumerable sheep, and echoing with voices and laughter. The washing-creek is a sort of bay of the river, a long strip of water caged in by lofty fences, topped by a platform of hurdles, whence the crookmen manœuvre the struggling, gasping sheep in the water below. At one end of the creek is the plunge, where the sheep are thrown in; midway down the wash two tubs are sunk to within a foot of the water's level, wherein stand the washers; and at the far end appears a gradually rising slope up which the dripping, water-logged ewes struggle inch by inch towards safety and the green feed awaiting them beyond.

It is nearing the top of the tide, but the work has not begun yet, nor will it begin until the flock has rested and cooled from its long journey over the Downs. As I come down the zigzag path into the chalk-quarry, the place seems almost as shy and still as ever. There is the multitude of sheep, a thousand or more, quietly nibbling in the great pen. The shepherds, the washing-gang, the little crowd of onlookers, are lounging on the green river-bank, chatting idly together as if there were no more weighty business in hand than to enjoy the summer morning. The dogs are mostly asleep on their chains. Only the old captain of the wash is astir. He roves about, here tightening up a girth in his tackle,

and there straightening a crooked hurdle ; and every minute or two he goes and looks over the plunge, measuring the depth of water with his eye. At last he gives the signal, every man goes to his post, and the silence of the old quarry breaks as with the crash of a sudden storm,

For it is nearly impossible to convey a real idea of the hubbub and turmoil of the scene under any less decided simile. From the moment the first sheep is thrown in, until the last terrified, bedraggled ewe staggers up the slippery incline at the other end of the creek, there is one long, unceasing babel of sound. Often a score of sheep are in the water at the same time, each one rending the air with her piteous calling. Those that have passed through the ordeal crowd together on the bank above, still lifting to the skies their mingled note of indignation and alarm ; and those as yet dry in the great pen anticipate their sufferings with a like deafening tumult. The yapping chorus of the dogs punctuates the entire symphony ; and every man engaged in the work joins in a general running fire of comment and mutual encouragement, although hardly any sound less forceful than the bellow of a bull can be heard above the din.

Not the least onerous and responsible part in a great sheep-wash is the element of danger to the sheep—the risk of drowning always present



THE SHEEP-WASH

when a large number have to be put through the creek at a swinging pace. The head shepherd, and often the flock-master himself, stands at the plunge and keeps a vigilant eye on the whole proceedings. Yet, even with the greatest care, sheep are sometimes drowned. It is a lucky day, for washers and shepherds alike, if the flock gets back to the farm without a single casualty.

But there is a humorous as well as a tragic side to sheep-washing. The continual splashing of the water soon drenches all the approaches to the creek, making them as slippery as ice. The platform of hurdles running the whole length of the wash is a particularly hazardous place from which to look on at the fun; and many a spectator, venturing too near, has received an impromptu ducking. This is an accident to which the throwers-in, as well as all the crook-men, are specially liable; and the day is hardly complete unless some one has succeeded in dipping himself as well as the sheep. The time-honoured joke then is to force him down the creek with his woolly companions in misfortune, and send him under the bar with all the rest.

III

For days past now the rain has been steadily falling, hour after hour, from dark to dark.

Rain and wind together are always disconcerting, and often melancholy in the last degree ; but still, soft summer rain like this, not heavy enough to obscure an outlook, yet sufficient to serve as an excuse for stopping indoors, has all sorts of commendable qualities. Much of the time, both in daylight and darkness, I have spent lolling out of a little dormer-window high up in the roof of this old house, and I have got to know many small things about life and work in Windlecombe that I have never known before.

It would seem that the cat and I are almost the only able-bodied creatures, feathered, four-footed, or human, that are not out and about in the rain, and I alone because the indoor mood happens to possess me. If I shed that craze before the weeping weather is done, I may be squelching about with the rest all day long in the sodden lanes ; or slithering joyfully over the green turf of the Downs miles away, barefoot and bareheaded, absent-mindedly whistling the first halves of innumerable tunes as I go. But of that in its season. The cat and I are of a mind now. The comforts of a dry coat appeal to each of us for the moment irresistibly ; and we lean out over the window-sill no farther than will afford me a view of the village doings, and her an eye-feast on the martins chattering about the roof-eaves below.

I saw Farmer Coles go by in his gig to-day, and heard him call out to his bailiff on the footway, 'If 'tis fine, George, i' th' marnin', get all th' tackle down to th' Hoe-field, an' make a start first thing.' The word brought my heart into my mouth. The Hoe-field is the field where the first wild rose opened to the spell of the night-ingale's music; and it meant that haying-time had come round at last. To-morrow there might be a new sound in Windlecombe, the high ringing note of the mowing-machines; and I knew then there would be no hour of daylight free from it, until the last meadow lay shorn and desolate under the summer sun.

In modern village life, the lot of the sentimentalist is no easy one, especially if he love his neighbour. Though he may secretly repine for the old days, when the grass came down to the rhythmic song of the scythe, and the corn to the tune of the sickle, he cannot blink the fact that, in farm life, prosperity and machinery go hand-in-hand together. The true, indeed the only, way for him now is to realise that not all the beauty of country things belongs to old times, and not all the hard, ugly utilitarianism of now-days has come in with machinery. Honestly considered, there is no mechanical farm-implement of to-day essentially at variance with the spirit of beauty. A threshing-mill or a reaper-

and-binder owes its form and parts to the same designer that made the sickle. The lines of a sailing-ship are unvaryingly lines of grace, because they are dictated by wind and water. And the unchanging needs of earth that made sickle, scythe, and ploughshare what they are, are as unchanging and imperious as ever.

It was hard to conceive the nightingale's song without the loveliness of the mowing-grass—the green dragon-flies cruising over its sea of blossom, the shadows of the swallows' wings upon it, and the grumbling bees like pearl-divers at fault down in its emerald depths. But now, listening to the songs of the birds in the village gardens round about, songs that seemed all the more joyous for the grey light and the unceasing patter of the rain, the truth fell cold upon me that the nightingale's was no longer among them. But a few days past, she was keening as sorrowfully as ever. In the one glimpse of soused moonshine last night I had thought to hear her plaint far down by the river ; but I could not be sure of it, and the sound had not returned. Maybe her song is done at last, and I could wish it so, now that the grass is to fall.

With a little neck-craning, I can contrive a view of the Reverend's garden, or as much of it as is discernible through the crowding trees. On the smooth fair lawn I can see his white doves

strutting, but they are there alone to-day. Generally, when I look forth, there is the gaunt black figure pacing to and fro, with these snow-white atoms fluttering about its feet. At the end of the lawn an arm goes out, and the figure pulls up at the first touch on the rose-covered trellis. There is the bank of mignonette at the other end, and here he halts and turns, warned by the music of the bees. But I have never been able to guess what guides him unerringly between the rippled edges of the flower-beds ; nor why, when walking under the wall, hung from end to end with blue racemes of wistaria, he goes no farther each way than the limit of the blossoms' reach. The gleaming white turrets of syringa, of acacia, of guelder rose, these I know are just visible to him ; and his doves lighten the darkness a little about his feet. But there are whole stretches of the garden given over to deep-hued things—rhododendrons and peonies, canterbury-bells and flaming tiger-lilies ; amidst these he must pass with eyes as little aware of their passionate colour as I of the tiger-moth's scarlet when he burrs in my ear at night. Yet is glowing colour of a truth a thing that reaches us through one sense alone ? I have doubted it ever since——

An angry shout struck up to me just now from a side alley below the green, where some of the

poorest and prettiest of the cottages are jumbled together. It is strange how far sounds carry on these still, rainy mornings. The shout was followed by the shrill tones of a woman, and the thud of something being hurled into the street. Presently, through the alley-mouth, appeared a man with a basket on his back. He came up the street through the rain, bent and lurching, his black beard wagging with imprecations he was at no pains to subdue. It was Darkie, the tramp, fern-seller, ne'er-do-well; a familiar figure in Windlecombe. As usual, he was pretty far gone in liquor. He took the middle of the way, addressing himself to all passers-by indiscriminately.

'Wimmin,' he cried, in his fine deep voice with the violoncello quality in it, 'wimmin?—ye may live 'til crack o' Doom, sir, and then never larn how to take 'em! "I 'll ha' two!" sez she, only laast Saddaday, ma'am, "an' bring another brace, Darkie," she sez, "when ye happens along agen,"—all as nice as nice could be, sir. An' now, soon as 'a sot eyes o' me, 'a hups wi' her futt, an'——'

He turned the corner of the house, and I heard no more.

I wonder, now, how Darkie fares this weather in his Downland eyrie. It has always been a mystery in Windlecombe as to where he passes

his nights. At all times, winter or summer, he is to be met with, tramping up the lane towards the Downs ; using the last light of day apparently in putting himself as far as may be from the chance of a night's lodging ; and, in the early mornings, you meet him trudging down again from the heights, his basket full of odd hedgeside garnerings for sale in the town. The mystery is a mystery to me no longer, although it was quite by chance I lit upon him in his secret nook.

Coming over the Downs one winter's morning, I saw a thin blue spiral of smoke rising from the very centre of a great patch of gorse on a hill-side ; and threading my way through the wilderness, bent on elucidating this phenomenon, I came at length upon a queer little scene. At the mouth of a sort of cave cut deep into the solid green heart of the gorse thicket, burned a little fire of sticks ; and over it hung a pot that gave forth a savoury steam. Behind the fire lay Darkie on a snug couch of hay and old sacking, fast asleep, with a pipe in his mouth. Evidently he had dozed off in the midst of his preparations for a meal. I took one swift look round his castle, noting various old tins, old coats, and the like hanging over his head ; several sugar-boxes filled with odd lumber behind him ; and a shepherd's folding-bar—a deadly weapon, twenty pounds or so of solid iron—lying conveniently

to his hand ; and then I crept away, as silently as I had come. Not that I feared any violence from him. In all the years we had been acquainted, I had never known him harm a mouse. But many was the time I had turned him away from my own door, unceremoniously enough ; sometimes with hard words, once or twice, indeed, with threatenings of his natural enemy, the constable. And I feared now reprisals of a kind that would hurt almost as much as the folding-bar heftily wielded—I feared to see Darkie stagger to his feet and pull off to me one of my own long-discarded caps, hear him give me generous and courtly words of welcome, and a kind look out of his mastiff's eyes, making me as free of his snug, green-roofed dwelling as I had so often made him free of the street.

Towards the hour of sunset I went up to the little attic window again, and looked out over the drenched housetops for any sign of a break in the weather. The rain had ceased, and the western sky had lightened somewhat, taking on an indefinable warmth of hue. There was no sunshine, nor any hope of sunshine ; but there was a light abroad that picked out all the browns and reds and yellows in the landscape, wondrously intensifying them, while leaving all other hues as grey and cold as ever.

Past eleven o'clock, and a cloudless night of

stars, with the wood-larks singing high over the village, and the cuckoos calling in the hills as though it were broad day. Yes—the change has come: Farmer Coles is never far out in his prognostications. It will be cutting weather to-morrow; and to-morrow I must be up with the earliest of them, and away to the Hoe-field.

IV

Of summer evenings in Windlecombe, all through haying and harvest time, you see men lounging about the village, one and all obsessed by the same trance-like, serenely dilatory mood. All have pipes well alight, leaving a trail of smoke behind them on the dusky golden air. All have hands thrust deep in trouser-pockets, carry their unshaven chips high, are tired as dogs, and look as somnolently happy as noontide owls. And of all the days of the week, there are more of these placid optimists abroad, and these characteristics are most to be noted in them, on the evening of the last working day.

To-night I went up and down the green—the most uncertain of a deliberately irresolute company—half a dozen times, perhaps, before, by common but unvoiced consent, we turned our lagging footsteps towards the inn. All the while

I was rejoicing in a possession, priceless indeed, yet hard-won as might be—a heart and mind filled with the spirit of the *Cottar's Saturday Night*. You cannot get this chief of all country pleasures in exchange for money. It is to be had in only one way, at the cost of long laborious days in the fields; and every tired muscle, every aching joint in my body, stood then as witness that I had done my best to earn what I had of it, if it might be earned at all. The old oak window-seat, in the parlour of the Three Thatchers, was as softly welcome as the Chancellor's woolsack: I would not have exchanged that mug of home-brewed ale for a draught of ambrosia at the feet of the gods.

The crimson sunset light streamed hot upon me, as I sat on the window-ledge half among the parlour company, and half among those congregated on the benches under the virginia creeper outside. Every moment or two some other tired haymaker strolled up, and added his solid breadth and his tobacco smoke to the throng. But we were not all field-workers in the Three Thatchers to-night, nor had only the common causes of tired limbs and sun-parched throats brought us together. Young Daniel Dray was knitting his dark brows over some papers and account-books at the trestle-table; and young Tom Clemmer sat close by, thought-

fully swinging a cricket-bat pendulum-fashion between his outstretched legs. A silence fell upon the company.

'Well,' said Tom Clemmer at last, 'I dunno. 'Tis ne'ersome-matter awk'ard fer Windlecombe. Wi' young Maast' Coles hayin', an' Tim Searle hayin'; an' George Locker, an' Tom an' George Wright, an' Bill here all hayin', how i' fortun' be us to make up a team?'

You could pick out the members of the cricket-club committee amidst the crowd by reason of their grave, troubled faces; whereas all other faces wore the easy contented smile of the village Saturday night. We had weighty business to consider. The annual challenge had arrived from the Stavisham club. They were a cock-sure, overweening lot, the town-eleven; and we had set our hearts on beating them at next Saturday's match. But there was the hay to carry, if the weather held. Many of our best players would be in the fields. It looked as though the town were to add Windlecombe again to their long list of village victories. Secretary Dray gnawed savagely at the butt of his pen.

'I knows how 'twill be,' he said. 'Five men an' a tail o' boys—the ould story! Tom here 'ull knock up his couple o' score; and then 'twill be hout, hout, hout, fer th' rest o' us i' two

hovers. An' I can jest hear they chalk-headed town chaps larfin' !'

It was a dismal picture. The fragrance went out of our tobacco, and no man thought of his ale. The three canaries carolled so joyously in their cages overhead, that I could have wrung their necks with all the pleasure in life. Young Daniel stared straight into the eye of the setting sun with the very face of disaster.

'But 'tis th' bawlin', he went on. 'Ne'er a change o' bawlers, there 'll be; an' me an' George Havers caan't go on fer ever. Na, na! 'tis all ower agen, I tell ye! The boys ull ha' their fun, an' Windlecombe another smashin' !'

He swept the club papers into his pocket, and rose to fill a pipe.

'But mind ye!' he added, looking grimly round on the company, 'I'll ha' that there flitter-mouse grocer-chap's wicket this time, or I'll be—— Ah! you see if I doan't, if I ha' to throw at his 'ed !'

Long after night had fallen, and all the village was quiet under the dim half-moon, I came out again upon the green, to wander and ruminate over the week that had gone by. I bared my arm to the biceps, and even in that disguising light I could see the sunburn dark upon it. Yawning and stretching involuntarily, a delicious

ache spread over me from top to toe. The Seven Sisters loomed hard by, and I went and lay down at full length on one of the seats, looking up through the black wilderness of boughs at the flinching starshine, and watching the nightjars as they wheeled and whirred above me through the scented dark.

They are a merry company, the nightjars. Perhaps there is no other sound in Nature that comes nearer to pure mirth and jollity than this rhythmic, spinning-wheel chorus of theirs. Up there, where the dense pine foliage made a sort of black coast to the dark blue ocean of the summer night, a whole nation of them was astir. They did not utter their peculiar note when on the wing; but every moment or two one of the concourse came to rest on a branch with a sudden snap, and forthwith set his spinning-jenny blithely going.

There is another sound which you hear of summer evenings, often far into the night, and which is nearly akin to that of the nightjar. I heard it only a minute ago in one of the garden hedges as I came across the green. But when the two songs occur together, there is no confusing them. They are both continuous, mechanical sounds, and each is curiously varied in tone, speed, and intensity. But while the nightjar's music is a rich full tremolo, uttered from some

high point, generally the branch of a tree, the grasshopper-warbler sings always close to earth. His note is thinner, shriller, faster. If your fingers were as deft as his slender throat, you could imitate the sound exactly by the rapid chinking together of two threepenny-bits.

JULY

I

IN the spring of the year, July seems as far off as middle-age seems to youth, and almost as undesirable. But when midsummer-day is past and gone, whether in human life or the year's progress, we look at things with clearer, more widely ranging eyes. The man in his prime strength, the season at the summit of its beauty—these are fairer things than the childhood and the springtime that have gone to make them. For the greater must be all the greater and more wonderful, because it contains the wondrous less.

Here is the first day of July come, and ever since sunrise I have been straying about the field-paths and lanes, wending home, indeed, only when the fierce noontide heat and a ravening hunger combined to drive me thither. There was this fierce, tropic quality in the sunlight from the very first. Though the gilt arrow on the church dial pointed barely to four o'clock, the level sunbeams struck hot and bright on the

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face ; and the dew in the grass by the laneside was shrinking visibly with every moment. In an hour the last water-bell was gone from the shadiest nook in the wood. Only the teasels could defy the thirsty sun, and these kept their water-traps over-brimming, as if fed from a magic source, far into the heat of the day.

There are many common things of the countryside—small facts to be learned for the trouble of a glance—which are little known because the glance is seldom given. As I passed along the hedge where the teasels stood up straight as a row of church spires, the glitter of the water in their leaf-cups caught my eye, and I stopped to look at them. I had always thought of the teasels as natural drinking-places for the bees, and other flying or creeping things ; but now I saw that their use was very different. Studying the plant carefully, the whole meaning of the thing dawned on me at last. The teasel must be a flesh-eater, more greedy and destructive than any spider in the land. In the cups a host of creatures lay drowned ; and upon the green, translucent leaves and stems there crawled multitudes of others, all destined for the same fate. There were in the water not only small insects, but bumble-bees, large caterpillars and slugs, even broad-winged night-moths that had fallen to the teasel's snare. I saw also that the

pools of water insulating every stem served not as traps alone, but actually as digestive cells, wherein the carcasses of the teasel's prey were gradually resolved into the slime that lay at the bottom of each cup. Somehow, I conjectured, this must be absorbed into the tissue of the plant; and cutting one of the stems asunder, just where the water-holding leaves embraced it, I came upon what seemed proof of this—a ring of apertures at the base of each cup—sink holes, in fact—leading into the substance of the stem.

The path wound up a hill-side over a field of tares, rippling away before me through the sea of purple blossom until it ended abruptly against the blue sky far above. And here another minute wonder brought me to a halt. Though it was so early, the hive-bees were out and about in their thousands. The great field was besieged by them. The air throbbed with their music. A madness for honey-making seemed upon them all; and yet, of all the busy thousands upon thousands set loose amidst what seemed illimitable forage-ground, nowhere could I see a hive-bee upon a flower. I went down on hands and knees for a closer view, believing at first that my eyes were playing false with me. But there was no doubt about it. Though on every side the great furry bumble-bees were seizing upon, and

dragging open the purple blooms of the tares, the hive-bees never touched these, for all they were in so huge a heat and flurry of work.

Now I knew that, while every other insect under heaven has its times of relaxation, deeming moments given over to dancing in a sunbeam or basking on a wall as moments not ill-spent, the honey-bee allows herself no such wasteful delights. If she were here in this tare-field in her thousands, and here she was, she came for no other purpose than a useful one. Clearly, therefore, the hive-bees were getting nectar in abundance: yet how, if they were not seeking it in the flowers?

Another minute's careful watch resolved the mystery. The tare-plant can almost rank with the slug-devouring teasel as a curiosity of the country-side. Knowing well that the hive-bee's tongue is not long enough to reach the sweets at the bottom of its flower-cup, the tare provides a special feast outside. At the base of each leaf-and flower-stalk, just where these join on to the main stem, will be found a little green flap or fin. In the centre of this fin is a valve, from which exudes a thick sweet liquid. If you are quicker than the bee, you may see the tiny globule shining in the sun as you turn the plant up. But even as you look, a bee fusses in between your fingers, drinks up the liquid in a

moment, and hums off to the next stalk. If we can extend no more sympathy to the bee in her folly of never-ending labours than to a lily-of-the-field at toil, we must at least concede something for her fearlessness. A peep into her own looking-glass is not always all of virtue's reward.

Over the field of purple tares, and on through the cornfields—wheat waving high and green, with the scarlet poppies flushing midway down in its murmuring depths. Who would have hawthorn and buttercups, the bridal white and gold of spring, when he can have poppies by the million, and roses, a wagon-load to be gathered from every hedgerow, if he will? Where I stood, breast-high in the wheat-field, the poppies crowded thick together among the green stems, making one unbroken sheet of colour that I could hardly look upon in the full light of the summer sun. A little way onward, and this blood-red flare was softened instantly: a dozen yards away there was nothing but the rustling green of the wheat. Every moment a lark rose out of the corn, singing, or dropped into it like a stone silently out of the blue. The hedgerow on the far side of the field shone with the roses, tremulous, uncertain, in the heated air. Beyond, in the blue mist of woodlands, a blackbird chanted his joy of the morning; and all round me in the distant ring of hills, there were cuckoos

chiming, each note clear but double, some of the songs perfect still.

From the wheat, the path led me presently into the oat-fields, green too, but of a cooler, greyer tinge ; and full of a stealthy motion and the sound of wind, though scarce a breath was moving overhead. There is something eerie, mysterious, about a field of oats on a hot summer's morning. It is as though the ears bent together and whispered to each other, passing the word on unceasingly from plant to plant. Looking over the plane of grey-green awns, stretching away under the still sunshine, you see low wave-lets rise and fall, furrows come and go ; the light changes ; or, suddenly, the whole expanse grows mute and still. A gentle, inconstant breeze would produce exactly this effect ; but you see it when not a leaf moves in the highest treetops, when even the aspens have hushed their quivering music under the noontide glare. No doubt, in a minor degree, all plants show this movement, whether it be caused by the travelling heat of the sun, or be simply due to the varying impetus of growth. In a great field of corn closely drilled, there are always the separate individualities of the plants comprising it to be reckoned with. That these exist in fact, as well as in fancy, is difficult to demonstrate. But that each field has a communal spirit—often different

from, or wholly antagonistic to, that of its near neighbour—is evident. For how else to explain why all the ears of corn in one field lean eastward, and all the ears in the next field may incline normally to the west ?

Coming homeward at last, surfeited of sunshine, eyes and ears outwearied with the brilliance and the melody of the day, I stopped awhile in the shadow of the church tower to consider an old familiar, yet perennially interesting thing. Just as I, at fiercest noon, was returning to the shelter of my own cool, ivy-mantled nest, the swifts that built in the tower were lancing back to their homes in the gloom of the belfry. Singly, in twos and threes together, every moment saw them arriving and disappearing through the jalousies ; but now none went forth again, though they had been coming and going all the morning long. There they would remain, I knew, quiet in the temperate dark of the old tower, until the sun had got out of its furnace-like mood. And then they would be out and about again, yet filled with a wholly different spirit. And towards sunset they would be tearing round the sky in a madcap chevy-chase, screaming like black imps let out of Inferno.

II

Windlecombe Mead, where the village cricket matches have been played from time immemorial, lies on the gently sloping ground between Arun river and the hills. It was the day of the great annual match with Stavisham, and most of the older villagers had congregated on the benches round the scoring-tent, when, in the sweltering heat of early afternoon, I hurried down to the field with pencil and book. The townsmen, it seemed, had won the toss, and had elected to put the home-team in. Young Tom Clemmer and young Daniel Dray were already at the wickets, taking middle. I looked round at the glum, set faces of the spectators, and felt tragedy in the air.

'Fower men an' a parson,' whispered the old cobbler to me behind his hand, 'a ould rickety chap as caan't run, an' five bits o' lads! Drat that there hay! Heough! Now they're aff!'

The umpire had called Play. The fast Stavisham bowler—we knew him of old—retired into open country, wheeled, and bore down on the crease like a bull at a gate. Young Daniel ducked, then turned up a face of indignant scarlet. But the ball had gone by for two, and a chuckle of relief spread through the crowd. The bowler prepared to try again.

'Dan'l's got th' sun in 's eyes,' said old Dray

anxiously, as he watched. 'A never can bide that top wicket! Steady now, Dannie, an' keep a straight bat!'

He roared out the last words. And then, in a moment, we were all on our feet in consternation. The ball had never left the bowler's hand—that much we were sure of. Daniel stood at his wicket safe and sound, but Tom Clemmer was coming back to the tent, followed by a derisive chorus from the whole field.

'Hout, Tom? Never hout!'

'What i' th' wureld houted ye, lad?'

'Hout! Never!—'tis a swindle, Tom!'

Amidst the eager exclamations of his friends, Tom Clemmer strode into the tent, and began slowly to unbuckle his pads. All the time he stared fixedly into space.

'I could ha' hup wi' my fist,' he said, after a moment's wrathful silence, addressing no one in particular, 'an' I could ha' gi'en that there grocer-chap sech a—— But there! 'tis no sense yammerin'! Doan't ye run out, sir, or 'a 'll ha' ye, same as 'a had me!'

He spoke now to the curate, who was preparing to go to the wicket, and the truth dawned upon us at last. The bowler had played Tom a very ancient and very mean-spirited trick. Old Clemmer, regardless of the agony it caused him, stamped his swaddled foot upon the ground.

'An' to think, Tom!' he groaned, 'as ye lit up th' forge-fire special for 'un only laast Sunday, 'cause his ould mare——'

But we had no thought for anything but the disaster that had befallen us, and all that was now imminent. With Tom Clemmer, the one hope of Windlecombe, out of the fight, what might happen to the rest? With bated breath we watched for the third ball. Young Daniel drove it over the bowler's head, and with a trembling pencil I put down two to his name. Playing with desperate care, he added two more before the end of the over, and we began to pluck up heart again. Young Tom came and stood behind me. His big thumb travelled down the list of names on the scoring-book.

''Tis not lost yet!' he said with reviving cheerfulness. 'Dan'l may do well, wanst 'a gets set. An' belike Mr. Weaverly 'ull bide out a bit. Then there be Huggins wi' his luck; an' who knaws but what the boys 'ull account fer a dozen or so atween 'em?'

I had now time, as the fielders were accommodating themselves to the left-handed batting of the curate, to glance down the list. The last name came upon me as an utter surprise.

'What? Never old Stallwood! Why, he must be seventy, if he 's a——'

'Ay! Cap'n Stall'ard sure enow! 'Tis a joke,

more 'n anything. But ne'er another livin' sowl there wur, as cud— Oh, Jupitty! Mr. Weaverly's hout leg-afore!

But it was not Mr. Weaverly's leg. With a white face, his body bent to the shape of an inverted letter L, and both arms clasped about his middle, the curate came tip-toeing back to the tent. He sat down silently in a corner. Huggins—a lean, red-whiskered giant in mole-skins—burst out into the sunshine and made for the wicket, waving his bat like a war-club and murmuring imprecations as he went.

'Now 'tis jest touch-an'-go,' said young Tom in my ear. 'If 'a hits 'em, they'll travel, you mark me! 'Twill be eether th' river, th' town, or Windle Hill.'

Huggins stood at the wicket, legs wide apart, and bat held high over his head. The bowling now was swift, stealthy, underhand. The ball sped down the pitch, never leaving the grass for an inch. A crack rang out in the dazzling July sunshine. Daniel Dray started to run, but the batsman waved him back. Huggins stood watching the skied ball until it came to ground in the next field. He laughed uproariously.

'What d 'ye think o' ee?'

It was another four, and that made eleven in all. Huggins swung up his bat, and spread his great

hob-nailed boots for a still mightier effort. The ball hissed down the pitch. Huggins caught it as it hopped from a tussock. Like a lark it soared up into the blue, and we heard a clear musical plunk as it dropped into the river. A roar of delight burst from the crowd.

'Lost ball!' shouted Tom behind me. 'Hoo-roar! Seventeen!'

Huggins spat upon his hands, took a reef in his leather belt, and lifted his bat again. The little underhand bowler came crouching up to the crease, and launched the new ball almost from his knees. Wide and wild it flew this time. But there was a sound of crashing timber; Huggins's wicket scattered into space, stumps and bails whirling together half-way up the pitch. He had hit the wrong thing.

'An' now,' wailed poor Tom Clemmer, 'tis as good as finished. Dan'l wunt ha' no chaance. Jest as well declare, an' ha' done wi' it. Th' boys?—they 'll be all done in a hover, an'——'

'Well, an' what about th' Cap'n, Tom?'

It was the voice of the Captain himself, and we all turned to look. He was leaning comfortably against the tent pole, the very picture of an old, superannuated forecastle-hand. He wore his usual vast faded blue suit. A seaman's cap with hard shiny peak gripped his bald head from the rear. His red face swam in joviality and

perspiration. Tom regarded him with mingled respect and doubt.

'Ye caan't run, Maast' Stall'ard.'

'Trew, Tom!'

'An' ye ha'ant touched a crickut bat fer thirty year.'

'Trew agen,' returned the Captain serenely.

'Ha, hum! well! a good plucked-un ye be, anyways. Now then, Dickie!'

The first small boy set forth over the sunny stretch of grass that lay between the tent and the waiting team. Very small and insignificant he looked in his school-corduroys, and leg-pads that reached well-nigh up to his waist. His advent was greeted with ribaldry from all parts of the field. We heard Daniel Dray admonishing the boy as he came smiling up to the pitch.

'Now, Dickie, doan't ye dare run 'til I shouts to ye, an' then run as if *He* wur after ye. Hould your bat straight, ye young varmint! Now then, look hout! There! what did I tell ye?'

Dickie's wicket was down, and Dickie himself was running back to the tent vastly relieved.

'Out wi' ye, Georgie Huggins! An' do as well as your faather!' cried Tom Clemmer encouragingly. ''Tis hover, an' Dan'l's got th' play now. Oh, Dan'l, Dan'l! if only 'twur you an' me!'

But, playing with the ingenuity as well as the

courage of despair, young Daniel Dray now began to show his true mettle. Odd runs he refused, taking only even numbers, so that each time the bowling fell to his lot again. At the end of the over, he stole a desperate single with the same object in view. He reached home safe enough, but Georgie was run out. Boy Number Two had been disposed of at the cost of a gallant six.

Following the same tactics, young Daniel eked out the remaining three boys with still more crafty skill. When at length old Stallwood, the last man, launched out into the sunlight to show the town what he remembered of cricket, the score had risen to forty-nine, and our spirits with it. We cheered him lustily as he went.

'Wan more,' quoth Tom Clemmer, 'jest wan, an' I'll light me pipe. There be allers a chaance wi' fifty. Lorsh! Look at th' Cap'n!'

Three times on his way to the pitch he had stopped, turned, and waved his cap in acknowledgment of the ovation given him. And now he was greeting the Stavishamites each by name, and shaking hands with the wicket-keeper. He got to the crease at last and grounded his bat. The next moment the whole field had left their places and run for the tent, leaving the Captain standing alone and amazed at his wicket.

'A doan't knaw 'a be hout,' said Tom. 'D' ye

onnerstand? 'A never heerd th' bawler shout, an' never seed th' ball acomin'. Belike 'a thinks they be all gone fer a drink, to hearten 'em at the sight o' sech a crickutter!'

And being free for a time, I took upon myself the task of walking out to the Captain, and breaking the news to him as gently as I could.

It was now Windlecombe's turn to take the field, and Tom Clemmer led out his team with a good heart, in spite of its tail of juveniles. Daniel Dray and the Rev. Mr. Weaverly were our first, indeed our only bowlers. One of the first batsmen for Stavisham was Daniel's ancient foe, the grocer; and we watched the beginning of play with breathless interest, for we knew Daniel would aim to kill. He grubbed savagely in the sawdust, then sent the first ball hurtling down the pitch.

The old men were still upon the benches outside, and in that quarter sympathy with Windlecombe was as staunch as ever. But in the scoring tent I sat amidst enemies now. The townsmen crowded behind me, a humorously sarcastic crew.

' Fifty to beat? My ould Aunt Mary! D'ye reckon we 'll do it, Bill? '

' Dunno. 'Tis ser'ous fer Stavisham. Only eleven on us, there be. Likely March wunt do 't off his own bat—no, not 'arf! '

' That there tinker-cove 's agoin' to bowl fust. There 'ee goos ! Wot a——'

The rest was drowned in a thunderclap of shouting. There was a general stampede among the spectators. For the grocer had driven Daniel's first ball clean into the tent.

It was a bad beginning for Windlecombe, and bad rapidly changed to worse. Young Daniel bowled steadily and coolly for the first over, in spite of continuous punishment ; but thereafter he lost first his temper, and then his head. The smiling grocer played him to all points of the compass ; and the more the grocer smiled, the more wildly erratic Daniel's bowling grew. As for the Rev. Mr. Weaverly, he could do no more than send meek, ingenuous balls trundling diffidently up the pitch ; and he was skied with heartrending regularity. The batsmen kept continually running. The little tent seemed to belly out on all sides with the cheering, as a sail with wind.

' Thirty up !'

' Thirty fer nauthin' !'

' Thirty - one ! And another ! Thirty - two ! Garn, March ! Wot a wazegoose ! Thirty——'

' Five ! 'Ooray !'

The shout went off in my ear like a punt-gun. And then there fell a sudden silence about me, as all strained eyes and ears out to the field.

Some altercation was going on, but not between members of the opposing sides. 'Drop ut, ye ould fule!' I heard Tom Clemmer roar; and, peering over the crowd, I saw Captain Stallwood, ball in hand, walking up to the pitch. He rolled up his sleeves as he came.

'Drop ut, I tell ye!' cried Tom once more, ''tis crickut we be playin', not maarbles, man! Gimme that ball, Stall'ard, or I 'll—— Lorsh! what be come to th' ould——'

The rest was a confused wrangle amongst the whole team. Presently, to our amazement, we saw all drift back to their posts, and old Stallwood take his place triumphantly at the bowling-crease. In the dead quiet that followed, I heard the grocer chuckle richly, as he got ready to smite the Captain all over the field.

The old man stood stock still on the crease, eyeing the batsman solemnly, the ball held low down between his knees. So long he remained in this posture, that at length impatient exclamations began to break out on all sides.

'Well! now ye ha' got un, Stall'ard, let 'n goo, mate!'

'Tain't i' church ye be, Cap'n. 'Tis crickut!'

'Bawl up, gaffer! We warnts to get hoame afore daark!'

And from the grocer, leaning with exaggerated weariness on his bat:

' Doan't ye be i' no sorter hurry, ould blue-bottle ! But when y' are ready, just send us a postcard, will ye ? '

The Captain's hand went slowly up, the ball held curiously against his wrist. He launched it with a sudden sidelong twist. As it rose high into the air, I could see that it went wide and off, even from my position in the tent. With a laugh the batsman strode out half a dozen yards to meet it. A moment later he was gazing back aghast at his splayed wicket. The Captain's rich husky voice pealed out above the din :

' There be a poun' o' butter fer 'ee ! '

And now we were the frantic spectators of a drama that gained in thrilling interest with every moment. The new batsman arrived at the wicket, and again old Stallwood sent the ball sailing down the pitch, wide as ever, but this time to leg. I watched it more carefully now. Though it made a high curve, it rose not a hair's-breadth after touching ground, but shot straight in. Again we saw the glint of a falling bail behind the wicket. The Captain thrust both bare arms deep in his trousers-flap, and silently grinned. The third man did little better. He succeeded in blocking a couple of the balls ; but the next, more crooked than any, sent him dumbfounded back to the tent.

There was no more ribaldry about me now.

The fourth batsman sallied out amidst a rustle of whispered apprehension and hard-drawn breaths, and returned almost immediately to the same tense atmosphere. Outside on the benches, the old men were rocking on their seats with delight, like trees in a wind. Bleak, the cobbler, was careering up and down, beside himself with joy.

'Fower in a hover!' he shouted. 'I reckons I knaws summat about leather, but I ne'er seed it do the like o' that! 'Tain't bawlin', I tell ye: 'tis magic!'

And now young Daniel Dray was bowling again, and bowling with renewed courage and skill. All his old command of length and break had returned to him. By the end of his over, another wicket had fallen, and the score had risen no higher than forty-three. The Captain took the ball once more, this time without any opposition. At once the fearsome whispering in the tent grew still. Almost we forgot to breathe, as the great dark hairy fist came slowly up into the sunlight.

But the Captain had changed his tactics. Instead of the leisurely, high-curving delivery with which he had done such execution hitherto, the ball left his hand straight and low and as quick as light. It pitched no more than an inch or two in front of the waiting bat, then struck

vertically upward. A crack resounded through the field. The batsman staggered—clapped a hand to his head. A moment more and he was picking an uneven course towards the tent, thoroughly satiated with the Captain's magic.

Very slowly the next man set out for the pitch. He stopped on the way to tighten a strap of his leg-guard, and again unconscionably long to adjust his batting-glove. Once he turned back a tallowy face, and seemed to be in two minds about something. But at length he got to the wicket and grounded his bat. The long arm uprose again, and the ball sped. It proved to be the last bowled that day. For once more that terrible upward break ended with a thud and a yell, echoed from nine panic-stricken men about me. The luckless batsman fled with as gory a visage as his companion had done, and none would take his place, though the grocer charmed and stormed never so wisely. Windlecombe had won by six.

Later by an hour the victorious eleven gathered in the parlour of the Three Thatchers Inn, old Stallwood grimly smiling in their midst. Tom Clemmer shook his fist at him, delight in his eyes.

'But 'twarn't crickut, Stall'ard!' he said reproachfully.

'Noa,' returned the old man, 'not crickut,

leastways not all on't. That there sing-chin-summat or other—Red Hot Ball, I calls un—that wur a trick as I larned in Chaney.'

III

How fast time flies you can never truly estimate until you go step and step with it through the summer woods and fields. In a sense, town-life—where there is so much of permanence in environment—puts a drag on time, and not seldom pulls it up altogether. Moreover, in towns time is estimated by events, by experiences. You hear a great musician, see a great play, look on at some magnificent pageant, or are shocked by some catastrophe; and straightway there is half a lifetime of emotion thrust between two strokes of the clock. By so much in very truth your life has been lengthened; for it is the intensity of living that counts in the civic tale of years. If you find an old man not only declaring that he has lived long, but believing it, it is a great chance but he tells you so in the close-clipped cockney tongue of the town.

And yet it is better to live in some far-away country nook like Windlecombe, and be reminded with every gliding summer hour that time flies and life is short, if only because of the undoubted fact that such a frame of mind carries a belief

in eternal youth as a necessary implication. Between life's dawn and the dusk of its western sky, there is literally no time to grow old in a natural, aboriginal environment. So inextricably interwoven are the threads of human existence and that of the green world round about, that the annual rejuvenation of the one infallibly communicates itself to the other. With every spring we start life afresh. Though we may live to threescore years and ten, we are children still ; and come upon death at last like an unexpected gust at a corner, old age unrealised to the very end.

In the weeks that are closing now, I have heard and seen more of the galloping hoofs of this swift, high-stepping jade, summer, than is good for entire peace of mind. Years ago I made a vow that I would never again eke out the fleeting golden days, like a miser to whom spending is not pleasure but only pain. I vowed that I would always squander time at this season ; let it drift by unthinkingly ; get my fill of sunshine, and fill and fill again to my heart's content ; yet do it as a strayed heifer in the corn, wantoning over an acre to each mouthful. But this time, as ever, the good resolution has been forgotten. The old parsimony has dogged the way at every step. I must be up with the sun in the small hours of each morning, fearful of losing a single

beam from the millions. To waste in sleep the blue, spangled summer nights, when all the country-side is resonant of life and fragrant with the scent that comes only with the darkness, has seemed like sacrilege. Yet, for all my industry, July is nearing its end, and I know that I have drunk but a drop or two out of its vast ocean. And already I have renewed the old vow, to be disregarded as ever, doubtless, when July again comes round.

On all the high-lying corn lands now, harvest has begun ; and the fields in the valley are fast taking on that deep tinge of gipsy-gold which is the sign of full maturity. Scarce had the shrill note of the mowing-machine stilled in the meadows, when the deeper voice of the reaper-and-binder began on the hill. All day long I sat in this cool quiet nook of a study, and the steady jarring sound came over to me from the hillside, filling the little room. I saw the machine, with its pair of grey horses, waiting at the field-gate, while the scythe-men cut a way for it into the amber wall of the grain. Steadily hour after hour it worked round the field, until at last, looking forth towards noon, I saw that only a small triangular piece remained uncut in the middle of the field.

Now there were a score or so of the farm folk waiting hard by, each armed with a cudgel ;

and with them seemingly every dog in the village. As the machine went round, every time making the patch of standing corn smaller, I could see rabbits bolting in all directions from the diminishing cover ; and there arose continually a hubbub of voices from dogs and men. Towards the end, the stubble became alive with the little dark scurrying forms, fleeing to the surrounding fields, the most of them escaping harmlessly for want of pursuers. But even then, as I afterwards learned, some eight or nine dozen were killed.

I have always kept away from these harvest battues, as indeed from all scenes of sport and congregations of sportsmen. I am willing enough to profit by these activities, and receive and enjoy my full share of the furred and feathered spoil admittedly without one humanitarian qualm. But this much confessed, I would gladly welcome the day when everywhere, save in the rabbit warrens, the sound of the sporting gun should cease throughout this southern land. Rabbits must be kept down to the end of time ; but, for the creatures that require preservation, too great a price is paid, and paid by the wrong class. It is not the owner of game-preserves who bears the main cost of his thunderous pleasuring. It is the lover of wild life, who sees the hawks and owls and small deer of the woodlands growing scarcer with every year ; and the children who,

in the springtime, are cheated out of their right to wander through the primrose glades.

To many this may seem a wearisomely trite point of view, affecting a grievance as old as the hills, and even less likely of obliteration. But though the point of view is ancient enough, the grievance is no longer so. Of late years the ranks of village dwellers have been very largely reinforced from the classes who care little for sport and a great deal for all other allurements of the country-side. Rural England is no longer peopled by sportsmen and the dependents of sportsmen; but, slowly and surely, a majority is creeping up in the villages, composed of men and women both knowing and loving Nature, and to whom the old-time local policy of endurance under deprivation of rights for expediency's sake, is an incomprehensible, as well as an intolerable thing. All the vast-winged, beautiful marauders of the air that I love to watch, are ruthlessly shot down by the gamekeepers on a suspicion presumptive and unproved; but the fox that, in a single night, massacres every bird in the villager's hen-roost, must go scatheless because poor profit may not be set before rich pastime.

One day, almost the hottest so far, I was out in the meadows, and came upon a curious thing. The path, or rather green lane, ran between high

hedges. On either hand there was a great field of flowering crops, the one red clover, the other sainfoin. There must have been twenty or thirty acres of each stretching away under the tense still air and light, much of a colour, but the sainfoin of a softer, purer pink. Both fields seemed alike attractive to the bees; but while, to the right, the sainfoin gave out a mighty note of organ music, the red clover on my left was utterly silent. Looking through a gap in the foliage, I could not see there a single butterfly or bee. The truth, of course, was that the nectar in the trumpet-petals of the clover was too far down for the honey-bee to reach; nor would even the bumble-bees trouble about it, with a whole province of sainfoin hard by, overbrimming with choicer, more attainable sweets.

As I wandered along, between these great zones of sound and silence, the air seemed to grow hotter and more oppressive with every moment. There was something uncanny in the stillness of all around me. The green sprays in the tops of the highest elms lay against the blue sky sharp and clear, as though enamelled upon it. Not a bird sang in the woodland. Save for the deep throbbing melody from the sainfoin, all the world lay dumb and stupefied under the noontide glare. And then, chancing to turn and look southward, I saw the cause of it. A storm was coming up.

Close down on the horizon lay a bank of cloud like a solid billow of ink. It was driving up at incredible speed. Though not a leaf or grass blade stirred around me, the cloud seemed tossed and torn in a whirlwind's grip. Every moment it lifted higher towards the sun, changing its shape incessantly, black fold upon fold rolling together, colliding, giving place to others blacker still. And flying in advance of all this, borne by a still swifter air-current, were long sombre streamers of cloud rent into every conceivable shape of torn and tattered rags.

And now, as the dense cloud-pack got up, the brilliant light was blotted out at a stroke, and this startling thing happened. Every bee, apparently, at work in the vast field of sainfoin, spread her wings at the ominous signal, and raced for home. They swept over my head in numbers that literally darkened the sky. Again, literally, the sound of their going was like a continuous deep syren-note, striking point-blank in the ear. For a minute at most it endured, and then died away almost as suddenly as it came. A bleak ghostly light paled on everything around me. Little cat's paws of wind flung through the torpid air. Afar the harsh voice of the oncoming tempest sounded. Slow hot goutts of water began to fall, and every moment the inky pall of cloud lit up with an internal fire.

At first, as I made off homeward in the track of the vanished bee-army, I tried to emulate their speed. But the torrent came surging and crying up in my rear, and in a dozen yards I was waterlogged. Thereafter, going leisurely, I came at last into the village, and so to the house. And here, in spite of the deluge, I must stop and look on at more wonders. It seemed almost impossible for any bird to sustain itself on wings under such a cataract. But there above me the martins were at their old incessant gambols, circling and darting about, hither and thither, high and low, in a whirling madcap crew; and higher still, right in the throat of the tempest, I could make out the swifts, hundreds strong, weaving their old mazy pattern on the sky, as though in the pearl and opal dusk of a summer's evening.

AUGUST

I

OLD Runridge's misadventure in wedlock has proved a trouble to more people than one in Windlecombe. In former years, though boating parties from the town were continually to be seen on the river, when the August holiday season began, they seldom pulled up at our ferry stairs. From the waterside the village had a somewhat inhospitable look, while a mile farther on there were the North Woods, Stavisham's traditional picnicking ground, where, at the gamekeeper's cottage, all were sure of a welcome. Such wandering holiday-makers as found their way into Windlecombe came usually by road, and were of the tranquil, undemonstrative breed, like pedestrians all the world over. There would seem to be something about sitting long hours in a rowing-boat which is detrimental, even debasing, to a certain common variety of human nature. The tendency to run and shout and skylark on reaching dry ground again appears to be irresistible to this numerous class. And it is at

Mrs. Runridge's door that wé must lay the blame of submitting Windlecombe to a pestilent innovation.

'Look ye!' said the old ferryman from his seat in the boat, waving a scornful hand towards his garden, as I chanced along the river bank one fine Saturday afternoon. 'Twur me as painted un, an' me as putt un up, jest fer peace's sake; but I'd ha' taken an' chucked un in th' river if I'd only ha' knowed what sort o' peace 'ud come on 't!'

A great white board reared itself on ungainly legs above the elder-hedge of the garden, and on it, in huge irregular characters, appeared the single word, 'TEAS.' By the side of the ferry-punt half a dozen town rowing-boats lay moored. And from the green depths of the garden there arose a confusion of voices, shrill laughter, and an incessant clatter of crockery. I had hardly realised what it all meant, when Mrs. Runridge showed a vast white apron and a hot perspiring face in the gateway. She bore down upon us with upraised hand, as though she intended bodily harm to one or both.

'Here, Joe!' cried she, giving the old ferryman a coin. 'Change fer half a suvverrin, an' shaarp's th' wured! Try th' Thatchers, or Mist. Weaverly, or belike—— Doan't sit starin' there, looney! Dear, oh Lor! was there ever sech a

man ! An' us all run purty nigh off our legses, we be !'

'Th' seventh time,' gasped Runridge, as we hurried together up the steep street, 'or like as not th' eighth—I dunno ! An' ut bean't as though 'a warnted money. Money ?—th' bed bean't fit fer Christian folk to sleep on, wi' th' lumps in 't ! An' to-morrer ull be wuss, if 'tis fine. Lor' send a hearthquake, or Noah's flood, or summat !'

When a naturally silent man attempts self-commiseration in words, his case is sure to be a desperate one. But we are all fated to share in his trouble now. On any fine Saturday or Sunday in the month, Runridge will be a familiar figure, hunting down from door to door the change that, in villages, is so scanty and so hard to discover. On Mondays we shall all suffer from our foolish kindness in allowing this reckless exportation of bullion. Only Susan Angel at the sweetstuff shop, and her small customers, will be unincommoded ; for the handful of battered farthings that has served them as currency during whole decades past will be necessarily saved by its insignificance, and will remain, no doubt, in the village for service amidst generations yet unborn.

But disturbing visitors to Windlecombe do not all come by the river. There is an iniquitous

job-master in Stavisham who has long had the village in his evil eye ; and at intervals, fortunately rare, he descends upon us with char-à-bancs drawn by three horses, and filled with heterogeneous human gleanings—the flotsam and jetsam of holiday-land strayed for the day into Stavisham from contiguous seaside towns.

They come in families, in amorous couples, in collective friendships of each sex and every number and age. They bring baskets of provisions, cameras, balls wherewith to play rounders on the green ; and of musical instruments many weird kinds—concertinas, mouth-organs, babies, and often yapping terriers that set all our own dogs frantic on their chains. An altruist, whose convictions have grown up amidst the quiet slow neighbourliness of the country, never finds his principles less easy of application than when he must atune himself to the holiday moods of people escaped from the town. There is no harm in all the shouting and laughter and fatuous horseplay. Inebriety is practically extinct among those who make summer the season, and the country the scene, of their year's brief merry-making. And yet it all seems mistaken, reprehensible, on the same principle that a blunder is worse than a crime. It is futile to tell him so, unless he already knows it, and then

it is equally unnecessary; but when the day-tripper learns to enjoy himself on the green country-side in the true spirit for which the sun was made to shine and the flowers to grow, he will have found the Philosopher's Stone that is to change, not mere lead and iron, but Time and Life themselves into gold.

On most mornings in August the more careful of us will go about thrusting greasy paper-scrap out of sight under bushes, flicking the incongruous yellow of banana-peel into obscure corners, lamenting stripped boughs, and marvelling at nose-gays thrown heedlessly away, as if the joy of them had lain in the mere plucking. But all the strange folk that use the village for their pleasuring at this time, do not leave these unlovely tokens behind them. Only yesterday, as I sat on the edge of the old worked-out, riverside chalk-pit here—whence you have a view north and south of the glittering water for miles—there came a new sound in the air, and I must throw aside my sheaf of galley-proofs to listen. The sound came from the river, and was still afar off. Many voices were joined in singing one of the old catch-songs, which go round a circle of three or four phrases, and to which there is never an end until you make an end of its beginning in slow time.

The sweet medley grew louder and clearer, and

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presently there was united to it the rhythmic plash of oars. A great tarry old sea-boat came round the water's bend, holding a party of a dozen or so. At last the labouring craft and the music came to a halt together, and the singers clambered ashore. I should have forgotten all about them now, for they soon passed out of sight amid the waterside foliage. But as I was coming homeward up the village street, I heard the voices again ; and there, under the Seven Sisters on the green, the little company were standing together, singing apparently for their own solace and delight. It was a strange thing, here in unemotional England, and many of the village folk had been drawn wonderingly to their doors. Yet the singers did not seem to remark this, nor to regard their action as anything out of the common. For, the song finished, they broke into several parties and sauntered on, talking quietly amongst themselves as if to make music were part of the daily conversation of their lives.

All that afternoon, from the quiet of my garden, I heard the voices at intervals, and from different points about the village, near and far. Once I saw the party right on the top of Windle Hill, strolling about in twos and threes, looking like foraging crows on the heights. After a while I saw them get together in a little circle ; and then,

right at the ear's-tip, I could just catch the higher notes of their singing—a strange wild song, much like the song of the larks that must be contending with them up there against the blue sky.

The last I saw of this mysterious company was at sunset, from my perch over the chalk-pit again. They had already embarked when I arrived, and had got their little ship well under way. The oars were dipping steadily to the same old catch-song that had brought them hither: there was still a faint throbbing echo of 'White Sand and Grey Sand' upon the air long after the sun had plunged, and the pale half-moon was beginning to enter a timid silver protest against the lingering crimson in the sky.

II

Near upon half a century I have lived in the world, and cannot yet say of the wind whether I hate it or love it most.

It is a dilemma that comes only to the dweller in the country, for in a town no sane man can be in two minds on the matter. With a careering, mephitic dust choking up all organs of perception, and the risk of being cloven to the chine by a roof slate or lassoed by a loose electric wire, no one can think of wind, hot or cold,

without heartily wishing it gone. But in the country, though for my old enemy, the north-east wind, I have nothing but fear and detestation at all seasons, warm gales, whether in winter or summer, come as often in friendly as in inimical guise. Like certain of the Hindu gods, the wind must be content to be treated according to the outcome of its activities, and receive laudation or revilement as this prove fair or foul.

All through to-day the south-west wind has been volleying up the combe, and everywhere in the village there has been a hubbub of slamming doors and rattling casements, and the flack and clutter of linen drying on the garden lines. People fought their way step by step down the hill against the wind, and tripped lightly up it, the oldest and feeblest forced into a smart jog-trot. Aprons were blown over faces, and hats snatched off at corners. The trees overshadowing the village have been lashing together, and roaring out a deep continuous song. The three thatchers on the inn sign, each with a gilded hod of straw, have been flashing signals up to my window every time the sun broke through the flying storm-wrack ; and a hundred times in the long day some riding witch of a rain-cloud has tried to drench us, but each time the south-west gale has seized it by the tattered skirts

and chevied it away over the hills before it could shed a dozen drops.

But it has been a good wind all through, and fine heartening weather ; and I have been glad to be abroad in it whenever I could spare or steal an hour. Said the old vicar, as we climbed up Windle Hill together this morning, his long white beard flowing out before him as he lay back on the blast :

‘ I know what you would have done, if I had let you choose the way. You would have struck deep into the woods, like the butterflies, and missed all the healthy buffeting of it. But there is only one place for a man to-day, and that is on the open Down. It never pays in the long-run in life to study how to keep out of the way of hard knocks.’

The sunshine raced ahead of us, vaulted the hill-top, and was gone. A scatter of warm rain drove out of the grey heaven. I turned up my coat-collar just in time to intercept the returning sun.

‘ True,’ said I, ‘ but the good of hard knocks depends not on their frequency, but on the profit you extract from them. I get and keep designedly as much of this as I can, so a little goes a long way with me. And I love the quiet and stillness of the deep wood, when the wind is roaring out in the open. If we had gone there to-day, we should have found the rosebay

willowherbs in full bloom, and more butterflies upon them than you could find in a week elsewhere. Besides, the ups in life are just as good for one as the downs. I can admire the old Scotch pine that clings to the bare hill-top through a century of winter storms, but I must not be inconsiderate of the lilies.'

The old Windlecombe vicar has a way of dealing with notions of this kind which is good for his hearer, whether he allow himself convinced, or consider his dignity affronted. He ventilates such ideas as he would let light into a room, by dashing a rough hand through the dust-grimed window. It is a method unpicturesque and often brutal, but effective and salutary in the main. I owe him gratefully many a pretty rainbow bubble of conceit exploded.

'Pluck your head out of the sand,' quoth he, 'for your ragged hinder-parts are visible to all the world of honest eyes. The pine and the lily are not choosing creatures. To them is their environment allotted, but to you is given the wilful fashioning of it. A man may be either gold or iron—made either for beauty or for use. But the one will not decorate, nor the other uphold the world, if he shirk the fires that must first refine or temper him. So away with your foolish Sahara tricks, and get on with the work the moment brings you.'

By this he meant I was to look about me, and tell him what I saw as we went along, a duty in which I was too often an unintentional malingerer.

'Yesterday a Londoner was in the village,' I told him, for a start, 'and he was scoffing at our Downs. "Where," said he, "are the green highlands of Sussex I have read so much about? Why, the hills are not green, but brown!" And it was quite true at this season, and from his standpoint down in the valley. Up here we can see what gives the Downs their rich bronze colour in summer-time. From below they looked parched and sunburnt, as though nothing could grow for the heat and drought. But now I can see that the general brown tone is really a mingling of a thousand living hues. Looking straight down as you walk, the turf is as green as ever it was; but a dozen paces onward all this fresh verdure is lost under the greys and drabs of the seeding grass-heads. Then again, the brown colour is due just as much to the blending of all other colours that the eye separates at a close view, but confuses from afar. We are walking on a carpet of flowers; we cannot avoid trampling them, if we are to set foot to the ground at all. Yellow goatsbeard and vetchling, and the little trefoil with the blood-red tips to its petals, and golden hawkweed everywhere; for blues, there

are millions of plantains, and sheepsbit, and harebells ; and the wild thyme purples half the hillside, making the bright carmine of the orchids brighter still wherever it blows. But I have not reckoned in half the flowers that——'

' Hold, enough ! I am sick of your Londoner, and of every human being for the moment. Listen to the free, glorious wind ! Down in the valley there we always think of the wind as a creature with a voice—something striding through the sky and calling as it goes. But up here we know that it is the earth that calls. Hark to it swishing, and surging, and sighing for miles round ! The sound is never overhead on these treeless wastes, but always underfoot. You keep head and shoulders up in the soundless sunshine, and walk in a maelstrom. Did you ever think that the larks always sing in the midst of silence, no matter how hard the wind blows ? Those are George Artlett's sheep we are coming to, are they not ? I ought to know the old dog's talk ! '

I scanned the hills about me, but could see no sign of sheep, shepherd, or dog. But as we drew to the edge of the wide plateau we were traversing, and got a view down into the steep combe beyond, there sure enough were all three. The sheep, just growing artistically presentable after their June shearing, were scattered over the deep



SOUTHDOWN EWES

bottom, quietly nibbling at the turf. Far below, in the shadow of a single stunted hawthorn, sat young George Artlett scribbling on his knee. No doubt Rowster had been lying by his master's side, until our shadows struck sheer down upon him from the brink of the hill. But now he was up and pricking his ears sharply in our direction, growling menaces and wagging a welcome at one and the same time. I gave the Reverend what I saw in few words. To my surprise he began to descend the steep hill-side.

'After all,' said he, 'George Artlett and I never really fell out. But we agreed to differ, and that is the most fatal, most lasting disagreement of all. I should have known better. I think I will risk a hand to him again.'

As we clambered down the precipitous slope, into the shelter of the combe, the wind suddenly stopped its music in our ears. There fell a dead calm about us. At the bottom, we seemed to be walking between two widely separated, yet almost perpendicular cliffs of green, with a great span of blue sky far above, across which the heavy cumuli raged unceasingly. George Artlett got to his feet at our approach, thrust his paper into his pocket, and gravely clawed off his old tarpaulin hat. He took the hand held out to him with wonder, and a little hesitation.

'And how fares the good work, George?'

Artlett was silent a moment. He tried to read the sightless eyes.

'Shepherdin', sir? 'Tis allers slow goin', but goin' all th' time. We did famous with th' wool, an'——'

'George, leave the wool alone. You know what I mean.'

George Artlett swung round on his heel, and swung back again. He counted the fingers on his gnarled hand slowly one by one.

'Be ut priest to lost runagate, or be ut man to man?' he asked, looking up suddenly.

'It is just one child in the dark way putting forth hand to another. For, to the best of us, George, comradeship can be no more than a heartening touch and sound of a footstep going a common road, and the voice of a friend. Do you see a light at the end of your path?'

'Ay! I do that!'

'Look closer. Is not the light just the shine of a Beautiful Face, very grave and sorrowful, but with a great joy beginning to spread over it, and——'

Though the deep voice stemmed on in the sunny quiet of the combe, I could distinguish the words no longer; for something, that was by no means part of me but of a more delicate nurture, had set my feet going against my will. I was half-way down the long alley of the combe before I

stopped to wait for the old vicar. And then, looking backward, I fell to staring with all my eyes.

'Reverend,' said I, after he had rejoined me, and we had walked on together in silence for a minute or two, 'I wish you could see what is before me now.'

I had brought him out of his reverie with a jerk.

'Well: on with it!'

'I see a green sunlit space, with the shadow of an old hawthorn upon it. And in the shadow I see two men kneeling, bareheaded, their faces turned up to the sky. And with all my heart I wish there were a third with them; but there is not another fit for such company, to my certain knowledge, within ten thousand miles.'

He seemed to weigh his reply before he uttered it. But:—

'You're a good fool,' said he, 'and I love you. And there were three there,—nay! a Fourth,—all the time.'

III

In winter-time, 'when nights are dark and ways be foul,' I can conceive of no pleasanter aspect of village life at any season than the indoor, fireside one; but when the long radiant August evenings are here, there is equally no other time for me. More and more, with every

year that glides by, life in Windlecombe at this season seems to focus itself round the Seven Sisters' trees upon the green. All the summer day through, the old folk gather there; and always a low murmur of voices comes drifting up to my window from their garrulous company. But it is after the day's work is done, and all, able or disable, are free for recreation, that the true life of the place begins.

There is something about the ease-taking of men physically tired after a long day's work in fresh air and sunshine, that fascinates one who is only mind-weary, and that alone from much chaffering with pen and ink. Though you have but cramped limbs to stretch out over the green sward, and, by comparison, but a torpid, attenuated flow in your veins, somewhat of your neighbour's healthful, dog-tired humour overbrims upon you; and after a pipe or two, and an hour's slow desultory chat, you can almost forget the tang of the study, the reek of old leather burdening imprisoned air, and congratulate yourself on a man's work manfully done, albeit vicariously—the day-long tussle with the good earth, mammoth 'nunches' and 'eleveners' devoured under hedgerows, a shirt a score of times soused with honest sweat, and as many dried by the thirsty harvest sun.

All the old Windlecombe faces were there

to-night under the drooping pine boughs, and most of the middle-aged ones. The younger men and boys were down on the Mead at cricket practice, and there they would stay as long as a glimmer of daylight remained in the sky. But the sun had still a fathom to go before it would lie, red and lusty, caught in the toils of the far-off Stavisham hills. I evaded with what grace I could the cake of ship's tobacco held out to me by Captain Stallwood, accepting as fair compromise a charge from the tin box of old Tom Clemmer, his dearest friend. Gradually the talk got back to the point where my coming had intersected it.

' 'Tis trew,' said the Captain now, 'trew as I sets here on a plank o' th' ould *King*, as ye cut an' shaped yersel', Dan'l.'

I followed his glance round the circle of benches. There was not a head among the company but was wagging dubiously. Old Daniel Dray's face was an incredulous, a horrified blank.

'What!' said he, 'a human critter swaller seventeen live——'

'I seed it,' interrupted the Captain, pointing his pipe-stem solemnly at us for emphasis, 'I seed it wi' my own pair o' eyes. Little lirrupy green chaps, they was, all hoppin' an' somer-settin' i' th' baasket. An' th' blackamoor, 'a putts 'a's mouth to th' lip o' it, an' "hap! hap!" sez he, an' every time 'a sez it, wan o' 'em jumps

in. An' when they was all down, 'a gies a sort o' gruggle, an' skews 'a's head ower th' baasket, an' "hap! hap!" sez he agen, an' every time 'a sez it, out pops—— But there! 'tis no sense tellin' ye! Folks sees naun o' th' wureld i' little small village places, an' an't got no believes.'

He was silent a while, then brought out a tobacco-box like a brass halfpenny bun, and held it up to the common view. It was old and battered, and had certain initials scratched on the lid. The Captain fingered it in mournful reminiscence.

'Lookee now,' he said, 'I doan't rightly know as I ever telled ye. "G. B." That bean't Tom Stall'ard, be ut? Ah! No, sez all on ye, ready enow. 'Twur George's, ould George Budgen as—— Dan'l, what year war't as I went aff to sea?'

Daniel Dray's lips moved in silent calculation.

'Seventy-three belike, or maybe seventy-four, 'cause ye 'd been gone, Joe, a year afore Harker's coo slipped the five-legged heifer, an' that wur i'——'

'Ay! trew, Dan'l. An' George Budgen, 'a wur shipmate along o' me purty soon arter I goood away. Well: an' this here baccy-box—th' laast time as I seed ut i' George's haand, 'a took a fill out av ut, jest afore 'a went on watch. An' ut come on to blaw that night—Gorm!

how 't did blaw! An' *rasin*, not aarf! An' i' th' marnin' never a sign o' pore George Budgen to be seen! Well now, full a fortnit arter that, what ud we do but ketch a gurt thresher on a trail-line, an' inside o' th' crittur what 'ud we find but a halibut, big as a tay-tray, all alive an' lippin', 'a wur. Sez th' cappen—I wur ship's-boy then—"Joe," sez he, "git an' clane un, an' I'll ha' un fer me supper," 'a sez. Now then, Dan'l, ye 'll never believe ut, but trew as ye sets there, clink goes my knife agen summut inside o' th' halibut, an'——'

'Goo on, Stall'ard!'

'He, he! We all knaws what be acomin', cap'n!'

'An' there wur—ah! but ye 'll ne'er believe ut, not if ye was Jonah hisself—there, inside o' th' halibut wur a gurt rusty hook as—— What-say, Dan'l?'

'Doan't 'ee say ut agen, Dan'l! You a reg'lar prayers-gooer, too!'

The Captain filled his pipe from the box, tragically ruminating in the silence that followed.

'Ah! pore George Budgen! 'A little knowed as 'twould be th' laast time as 'a'd pass his tobaccer-box to a friend!'

The sun had long set, and the dusk was creeping up apace. Here and there in the shadowy length of the street, lights were beginning to break out.

Where we sat under the dense canopy of pine-boughs, night had already asserted itself, and to one another we were little more than an arc of glowing pipe-bowls. Old Stallwood chuckled richly from his corner. A sort of inspiration of mendacity seemed to have come over him to-night.

'But Lor' bless ye!' he went on, 'that bean't nauthin'!—not when ye've been five-an'-thirty year at sea. I knowed a man wanst as worked in a steam sawmill way over in Amurricky somewheres; an' what did 'a do wan fine marnin' but get hisself sawed i' two pieces; an' wan piece died—th' doctor cud do nought to save ut. But t'other piece kep' alive for ten year arterwards—ah! an' did a man's work every day!'

Old Daniel bounced to his feet. He breathed hard for a full half-minute.

'Joe Stall'ard!' he said at last, severely, 'shame on ye fer a reg'lar, hout-an'-hout, ould leear! A man cut in two? An' lived ten year arter—leastways th' wan part o' him? Fer shame, Joe! 'Tis traipsin' about i' all they heathen countries, I reckons, as has spiled ye! Ah, well, well-a-day! There they be, lightin' up at th' Thatchers! Coom along, Tom Clemmer!'

Three squares of red shone out amidst the twinkling dust of the street, denoting the

curtained windows of the inn. It was the signal for which all had been waiting, and a general stir took place in the assembly. At length none remained about me but the old seaman. He had said nothing while the dismemberment of the group was in progress, but had sat shaking in silent merriment. Now he, too, got slowly to his feet.

' 'Tis wunnerful,' he observed, moving away, 'real onaccountable, th' little simple things as some folks wunt b'lieve. There be a thing now, as——'

But this story of partitioned, yet still living humanity, even though it came from America, was too much also for me; and I told him so. He stopped in his easy saunter towards the inn.

' 'Tis trew!' he averred as stoutly as ever. His rich, oily chuckle came over to me through the darkness. 'Mind ye! I didn't say as th' man wur sawed into two ekal parts: 'twur but th' thumb av him as wur taken off. Belike I'll jest step acrost to th' Thatchers now, an' tell that to Dan'l.'

SEPTEMBER

I

AUGUST holiday-makers in Windlecombe are mainly of the normal, obvious kind, the people for whom guide-books and picture post-cards are produced, and by whom the job-masters and the boat proprietors gain a livelihood. But September brings to the village a wandering crew of an altogether different complexion. There is something about the temperate sunshine and general slowing up and sweetening of life during this month, that draws from their hiding-nooks in the city suburbs a class of man and woman for whom I have long entertained the profoundest respect. With every year, as soon as September comes round, I find myself looking out for these stray, for the most part solitary, folk, and, in quite a humble, unpretentious spirit, taking them beneath my avuncular wing.

That they seek the quiet of an inland village in September, and not the feverish, belated distractions of the seaside town, is an initial point in their favour. But almost invariably they

bring with them a much more subtle recommendation. They are down for a holiday, but they have come entirely without premeditation. Suddenly yielding to a sort of migratory impulse, they have locked up dusty chambers, or left small shops to the care of wives, or begged a few precious days from niggardly employers ; and come away on a spate of emotional longing for country quiet and greenery, irresistible this time, though generally the impulse has been felt and resisted every autumn for twenty years back. Indeed, there must be some specially fatal quality about this period of time, for I constantly hear the same story—no holiday taken for twenty years.

At noon to-day, after a long tramp through the fields, I came up the village street, and paused irresolutely outside the Three Thatchers Inn. The morning had been hot, and the walk tiring ; moreover, it was the first of September, and the guns had been popping distressfully in all the coverts by the way. I knew that before sundown a brace or two of partridges would be certain to find their road to my door ; but this did not prove, and never has proved, compensation for the flurry and disturbance carried by the noise of the guns into all my favourite conning-places, or arenas for quiet thought. The whole world of wild life was in a panic, and I with it.

The red-ochred doorstep of the inn glowed in the sunshine at my feet, and from the cool darkness beyond came a chink of glasses and murmur of many tongues. It all seemed eminently consolatory for the moment's mood. Within there, no one would fire a gun off at my ear, nor stalk past me with a shoulder-load of limp, sanguinary spoil, nor warn me out of my favourite coppices with a finger to the lip, as though a nation of babies slumbered within. I was a lost man even before I began to hesitate. I stood my stout furze walking-stick in the porch beside a drover's staff, a shepherd's crook, and three or four un-denominational cudgels ; and plunged down the two steps into the bar.

Now, before my eyes had accustomed themselves to the subdued light, and I could see what company was about me, I had become aware of a strange odour in the air. It was the scent of a tobacco, happily unknown in Windlecombe : neither wholly Latakia nor Turkish, not honeydew alone nor red Virginia, cavendish nor returns, but a curious internecine blend of all these. I knew it at once to be something for which I have a constitutional loathing—one of the new town mixtures, wherein are confused and mutually stultified all the good smoking-weeds in the world.

Looking more narrowly about me, after the

usual greetings, I discovered a vast and elaborate meerschaum pipe in the corner, and behind it a little diffident smiling man. But this could not entirely account for the overpowering exotic reek in the room. I missed the familiar smell of our own good Windlecombe shag, although there were half a dozen other pipes in full blast round me. And then I realised the situation. The stranger had seduced all the company to his pestilent combination; and now, as I lowered at him through the haze, he was holding out his pouch even to me, who would not have touched his garbage if it had been the last pipe-fill left on earth. But he took my curt, almost surly refusal as if it were an intended kindness.

'Ah! you do not smoke? Well: it does seem a kind of insult to the pure country air. But in towns, you know, what with the din and the dust, and the strain on one's nerves, everybody—— And of course I must not quarrel with my bread-and-butter!'

I produced my own pipe and pouch, and filled brutally under his very nose. Serenely he watched the operation, and without a trace of offence.

'I am in the trade, as I was telling these gentlemen here when you came in. Do you know the Walworth Road, in London? My shop is just behind the Elephant, and any day you are

passing, I—— But wasn't I glad to get away, if only for the few hours! And I do assure you, sir, I haven't been out of London for nearly—— nearly——'

'Twenty years, I suppose?'

He looked at me in placid surprise.

'Lor', how did you know that now? But it is quite true. Being single-handed, you see, it isn't easy to—— But I was glad, I tell you! And I had never seen a real country village in my life, until I got out of the train at Stavisham and walked on here. Isn't it quiet! And how funny it seems—no asphalt-paving, and no wires running all ways over the house-tops, and the singing-birds all loose in the trees! *And* flowers! I suppose there is a law to prevent people picking 'em: there were no end along by the road I came.'

Somehow my heart warmed to this inconsiderable by-product of civilisation that had strayed amongst us; and presently, as much to my own surprise as his, I found myself loitering down the hill again, with him at my elbow, having promised to show him that there were other flowers in the country beside the dust-throttled daisies and dandelions of the roadside.

We took the path that runs between the river and the wood. He soon let his pipe go out, for he moved in open-mouthed wonder all the way,

which rendered smoking impracticable. At last we came to a bend in the river, where the bank sloped gently down to the water-side covered with all the rich-hued September growths, and we sat down to rest. I did not plague him with the names of things, nor with any talk at all ; but lay, for the most part silently, watching the effect of the place upon him, as one might study the demeanour of a dormouse let loose amidst the like surroundings, straight from Ratcliff Highway.

He took off coat and hat, and sat quite still for awhile with legs drawn up, and his chin upon his knees. But presently he fell to wandering about like a child, ducking his pallid bald head over each flower as he came to it, but keeping his itching fingers resolutely clasped behind his back. It was a brave show, even for this brave time of year. Though other months afford perhaps a greater variety in colour and kind, Nature in early autumn seems more forceful and impressive because she concentrates her energies into the dealing of the one blow, the urging of the one appeal upon the colour sense. It was the Purple Month. Look where we would, the same royal colour filled the sunshine. Purple loosestrife edged the river, and purple knapweed, thistles, heather, purple thyme and willowherb and climbing vetch hemmed us in on every side.

Paler of hue, yet still of the same regal dye, the wild mint and cranesbill, marjoram and calamint, crowded upon one another; and close to the water's edge, the Michaelmas daisies were already in full flower—under both banks the soil was tinged with their pure cool lilac, mirrored again yet more faintly in the drowsy water below.

For half an hour, perhaps, the little tobacconist wandered up and down this enchanted place; and then he came back to me, treading on tiptoe, hushed, and solemn-eyed, as if he were in church.

'You live hereabouts?' he asked, in a voice little above a whisper, 'all the year round, don't you? And nothing to do but just put on a hat whenever you want to come here, and in ten minutes here you are! Nothing to pay, and no trouble. Oh, my stars!'

'And it is not always the same, you know. I pass this way nearly every week, and there is always something different. The flowers change with every month. You hear different birds singing, according to the season. The leaves on the trees come and go, and the sky shows you a new picture every time you look at it. Even the river changes. It is the top of the tide now: that log, floating out there, has not moved a dozen feet in the last five minutes. But in an hour's time the water will be driving down swift and strong, and all the reeds and rushes, that

now stand up quite straight and still in the sunshine, will be bending and trembling in the flow.'

'Ah!' He crowded a perfectly bewildering variety of emotions into the breathed monosyllable. 'Is that a nightingale singing over there?'

'No; you are too late for nightingales: they have done singing these two months and more. That is a robin. The robins have just begun to sing again after their summer silence; and when that happens, you know the summer is almost done.'

He sat now mute at my side for so long, that at last I must steal a glance at him. I saw him brush a hand hastily across his eyes.

'I—I am glad I came, of course,' said he, musing, 'but—but I have been the worst kind of fool all the same. Just think of going back there to-night! Lor'! just think of it! Yesterday morning I watered the geraniums in the window-boxes, and gave the canary his seed; and, says I, "Here's singing-birds and flowers, as good as any you'll get in the country!" Then I went to the shop door, and saw a cart full of straw going by, and another of green cabbages for Boro' Market. "Lor'!" I says, "the country comes on wheels to your very door in London! London for me!" And now I'll never get that

feeling back again, no, never! The very worst kind of fool, I *don't* think!

Close by us there grew a great tuft of valerian. As he sat staring tragically at its disc of deep red blossom, butterflies came to it with every moment, sipped awhile, then passed on. Painted ladies, red admirals, little tortoiseshells always in twos or threes; finally a peacock butterfly sailed over to the valerian and settled there, her rich colours aflame in the sunshine. She spread out her great vanes, the upper covering the lower. Then she gently slid her upper wings forward, and gradually the wonderful spots on the lower wings appeared, like a pair of slowly opening, drowsy, violet eyes. The little tobacconist breathed hard.

'I can see it all clear enough,' he said tremulously. 'A man gets a real chance here. Come worry, come sickness, come bad luck, come anything you like—all you have got to do is to open your eyes and ears, and off it goes like the bundle of sins in the *Pilgrim's Progress* book. But in London——' He stopped short; then, in a tone of deep, despairing disgust, 'Geraniums! — Canaries! — Cartloads of cabbages! — bah!'

I had not found myself confronted by so difficult a proposition for many a long day. If only the Reverend had been there! But there was

nothing for it but to try a joust with the situation alone.

'Depend upon it,' said I, 'if coming amongst the beautiful natural things of the world has made you despise the mean, ugly, necessary parts of your life, then you have been a fool indeed—one of the worst kind. But are you really the sort of fool you think? And have you not overstated both cases alike? In neither town nor country is there all of good, or all of evil. There are plenty of geraniums and cabbages in Windlecombe, and—alas!—canaries. And in London there is plenty of beauty, if you look for it with the right eyes.'

'Beauty?—in London?' he repeated incredulously.

'Yes, truly; and the people who see it, and enjoy it most, are just those people who have the deepest knowledge of, and love for, the natural things of the country-side. Now, shall I tell you what sort of a fool you really are?'

He thought a moment, eyeing me in some perplexity. 'Well—yes,' said he at last, 'if it isn't too much trouble.'

'It is a lot of trouble, and I am not sure I can do it. But I will try. Did you ever hear of the saying, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise?"'

'No: I can't say that I ever——'

'Well, you have fallen right into that trap. You have given yourself twenty years of that kind of bliss, and now you have got to pay for it. But what was it made you start off this morning in such a hurry to get to the country, when only yesterday you were quite content with your window-boxes and your screeching yellow gewgaw?'

He considered a little, then blushed to his eyes.

'It was an old book,' he said mysteriously, looking round apparently to make certain we were alone, 'nothing but an old book on a book-stall. I picked it up just out of curiosity as I went by last night, and there were some dried flowers in it—dog-roses, I think. And then I looked up and saw the moon shining very small and bright high up in the sky; and it came over me that though she kept one eye dutifully on the Walworth Road, with the other eye she might well be looking down on the country lane where those roses grew years ago. And thinks I, all of a creep, like, Why can't a man look two ways at once; and if he must give one eye to business, why can't he give the other to just what he likes? And then I——'

'And then you certainly left off being the kind of fool I mean—left off for ever. Well: that saves us both a lot of trouble, for we are both

wrong about your case, it seems. You need not fear to go home to-night. You will find those geraniums as fresh and sweet as the valerian there, and just as populous of butterflies. And the canary—you will hear in his song every morning the notes of all the wild birds that have sung to you to-day. And when next a wagon-load of straw goes by your shop, it will not be mere straw, but a field of wheat under the country sunshine: the sound of the wind in the Walworth telephone wires will be for you only the rustle of wind in the corn. That is what I meant by London beauty.'

II

That summer is drawing to its end, and autumn close at hand, one need not look at the calendar to know. Throughout a morning's walk, signs of imminent change crop up now at every turn. The wild arums that you have forgotten since last you saw them turning their pale green cowls from the light, give out a bold glitter of scarlet in the shady deeps under every hedgerow. Each day sees the hips and haws growing ruddier. Though September is scarce half gone, the green bracken-fronds in the woods are already alight at the tips with crimson and gold; and the heather on the combe-side has lost its clear rose-

red. The song of the bees in it seems as loud as ever, but for every tuft of living blossom there are two that are faded and brown. The good times are nearly over for the honey-makers, and each day the gathering of a full load of nectar means travelling farther afield.

I wonder why it is I always look forward to the renewal of the year's life with so much eagerness and impatience, and yet meet its decline with such surpassing equanimity. Am I—I have often asked myself lately—the same being who industriously searched the river bank for a whole bleak February morning in quest of the first coltsfoot, greeting it with an unconscionable extravagance of rejoicing: I who now tread the same way in nowise perturbed, nor even unelated, at the obvious fact of each day's lessened ardour? The truth that the year is already on the long downward road, riding for its winter fall, awakens in me not a pang of regret. Indeed, I neither remember the departed magnificence of June as something lost, nor regard the ever-diminishing September days as portent of penurious times to come. With autumn, as with advancing age, when once each is assured, irrevocable, the natural tendency seems to be towards a looking neither backward nor forward, but towards a joyful acceptance of the things that are. And so, at these times, whatever our

declared principles, we one and all develop, or degenerate, into optimists.

But, of a truth, it needs very little of this mental condiment to be happy in a Sussex Downland village in September. Perhaps none but the very old can, at any time, sincerely avow a repugnance towards machinery in farming: certainly, at this season of the year, the whole spirit of village life receives benefit from it. They have been threshing up at the farm to-day, and from sunrise to sunset, all through the still, quiet, golden hours, the voice of the threshing mill has permeated everything, blent itself with the song of the robins in the garden, with the chime from the smithy, with all the other sounds of labour that go to make up the silence of country dwelling-places. I have come to look upon this sound as the veritable keynote of autumn, and to believe that it has an influence on all hearts at this season, entirely underrated by those whose business it is to study rural affairs.

It is the fashion to contemn the old melodramatic trick of still-music; but, for my own part, I have never been able to resist the low sobbing and sighing of the violins when the stage-story is being cleared up, all wrongs righted, and the villain given his due. The speech itself is nothing to me. It is seldom regarded, and remembered never. I should be just as deeply

moved if all that leashed, melodious passion went as setting to 'Old Mother Hubbard' or 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.' And on the same principle, when this beautiful, solemn voice of the threshing mill dwells in the autumnal air, I find myself doing the commonest things with a sense of high Fate and speeding of the world's progress. But, indeed, Nature works throughout largely on this still-music plan, and therein lies one inestimable advantage of living in the country. Bird song, to all intents and purposes, unceasing throughout the year—the songs of stream, river, and sea—the songs of the four winds—all work together for good on the hearts of those men and women who, by their own design, or by external destiny, have been led to keep their thread of life running by green woods and fields.

As the sun went down behind the hills, and left the world afloat in wine-coloured mist, every sound of work ceased in the village, save this rich throbbing voice of the threshing mill up at the farm. I went out into the dreaming light to listen to it. From where I sat on the churchyard wall, I could make out that they were prolonging the work into the dusk, so that the last rick might be finished now, and the threshing gang move on to-night to the next farm. There was the deep sound of the mill itself, one

tremendous baritone note succeeding another, each held for a moment, and then suddenly changing to one higher or lower in the sonorous clef. Apart from this, I could distinguish the fuss and fume of the engine, as it drove its white breath in little unsteady gusts up against the violet calm of the sky. And there was another sound—the flapping song of the driving-belt—a note that punctuated everything, as though some invisible conductor were beating time to the general symphony. But the combined effect of all was infinitely harmonious and restful.

Yet I had come out, in the main, to hear, not this familiar part of the music, but something about it that I loved to hear most of all; and this was the stopping of the machine. It was almost dark before the last sheaf went to the mill, and steam was shut off. And then the wonderful note began. The machine took an appreciable time to run down. But now there was no upward inflection in its voice. Note by note, each note more drawn out and quieter, the rich tones fell through every stage of an octave, until at last they died away in the profoundest, softest bass. Even then I fancied I could feel the solid earth still shuddering with a music too deep for human ear.

III

I think the last of the summer boating parties to Windlecombe has come and gone; at least for a week I have seen and heard nothing of revelry. But the thin stream of odd folk still dribbles into the village from road or Down.

- There were two elderly ladies, obviously sisters, wandering about the place one day, who afforded material for commentary to most curious tongues. Severely and sparsely clad in grey tweeds, wearing black felt hats each wrapped about with a wisp of grey gauze, and gold spectacles, over the shining hafts of which little tight glossy-white ringlets depended, pink serene faces inclined to be downy, and voices low and gentle yet extraordinarily penetrating and clear—they crept about the village all day long in an ecstasy of enjoyment, peering into cottage doorways, looking over garden fences, watching the children at play on the green and the mothers hanging out their linen, gazing with timorous delight down into the wheelwright's sawpit, and into the black deeps of Tom Clemmer's forge. And all the while, though they kept up an incessant low interchange between themselves, they accosted no one. Apparently Windlecombe was to them a sort of spectacle, half peep-show and half

menagerie, where everything might be looked at, but nothing touched. The last I saw of them, they were standing at the far end of the green, looking towards the seats under the Seven Sisters where two old rustics slumbered peacefully in the sun. The pair were in earnest consultation, and obvious, though wholly affectionate difference on some point. At length one, apparently the more ancient by a year or two, raised her hands with a gesture of reluctant consent. And then the other timidly approached the old men, presented each with what, at a distance, appeared to be a surplus sandwich drawn from a reticule, and returned to her companion, giving her—before they made off down the street together—a grateful, childish little hug.

On another day a very different pair dropped down from the skies amongst us. They were two men scarcely of middle age, the one with a swirl of coppery hair topping a high forehead, the other sombre-locked, low-browed and swarthy; both alike shabby, unshaven and unkempt. They came swinging down the hill-path together, hatless and barefooted, laden up with certain dusty travelling-gear, the one of them carrying in addition a leather-cased violin. As they strode through the village street they made the place resound with their laughter, jovially greeted all and sundry that chanced in their way,

and finally disappeared through the door of the Three Thatchers Inn.

Thereafter, sitting at work by the window, I forgot all about them, until a far-off strain of music gradually forced itself upon my ear. I could make out the violin, played as though it were three instruments at least, and above it such a voice as I had heard only once in my life before. I saw that passers-by were halting in the roadway to listen. Some were crowded round the inn window, craning over one another's heads. Then the music stopped, the pair of harmonious vagabonds reappeared, and made straight for the Seven Sisters, all the folk jostling at their heels. A moment later, the violin struck into an air that sent my pen clattering to the paper, and my feet speeding towards the house-door. It was the 'X——,' the tenor song from 'Q——,' played by a master hand. Before I reached the fringe of the little crowd—taking the old vicar by the arm as I went—the copper-haired man had mounted upon the seat and had begun to sing the incomparable melody, hurling it over the heads of the crowd with a passion, a force, yet with a surpassingly delicate sweetness of tone, that drew the people spellbound closer and closer with every moment round him. The old parson's grip tightened on my sleeve.

'What is he like?' he whispered. And when

I had told him—' Strange that he should come here and—— But there can be few with a voice like that: it must be—— Ah! listen! Don't you know now? '

For the song had changed. The violin had slowed down into a simple quiet undertone. And then there pealed out upon us an air that a year ago had been made famous by one man alone, and he almost the greatest in his art. As he sang, his great chest heaving in the sunshine, I watched him, and once he looked swiftly in our direction. He gave us the whole piece, that finishes on a note incredibly high, yet is not really an end to the song, for the note is one picked out, as it were, at random in the scale. Then, to my amazement, he got down from the bench, took the hat from the head of the nearest boy, and went gravely about among the folk, collecting pennies. From me he levied toll as from the rest, but instead of holding out the hat to the Reverend, he placed it, money and all, into his hands, adding to the goodly store a shining piece from his own pocket. ' You will know what to do with it,' said he, his grey eyes twinkling merrily.

A minute later the pair were trudging off together down the street, as they had come, with their dusty, travel-stained satchels swinging behind them, and their long hair blowing in the breeze.

IV

Yes, the summer is gone, in very truth. With every day now, and every hour of the day, the writing on the wall shows plainer. While the hushed, hot times endured, it was still possible to believe red autumn as far away as ever; for not a leaf in oak or elm has changed, nor will change, perhaps, for weeks to come. But the tell-tale winds of the equinox are upon us, bringing the very voice of autumn with them; and the acorns are falling by the river, and the thistle-down drifting white upon the hills.

I began this day badly—badly, that is to say, from my own private point of view; which is a point, it may well be, like Euclid's, having position but no dimensions, yet a point nevertheless. Chancing to wake with the dawn, I saw that the day was beginning with a beautiful smoke-pearl trellis in the east, behind which welled up an ever-strengthening fountain of silver white. Coming presently out upon the green under this pure pale glow of morning, I was startled by a cry that came echoing from the misty twilight of the hills.

'Hi-up! Hi-up! Voller, voller, voller!'

Hoarse, harsh, undeniably brutal it sounded in the sweet, snow-white lustre of the virgin light. And then came the shrill blare of the

huntsman's horn, the confused yelping and baying of the pack, and the dull thunder of beating hoofs, as the hunt drove over the hill-top, and fell to drawing Windle coverts.

At once the silent village awoke. Windows were thrown open and heads appeared. Dark figures burst from cottage doors and went pounding up the lane that led to the hills. Round the covert the horsemen gathered in a motionless ring, while the huntsman drove his pack through the undergrowth, for ever urging them forward with that fierce guttural note, which was more like the cry of a wolf than a man. At length a fine cub fox broke cover, and led the whole company a ding-dong chase over the hills, and out of sight and hearing for good.

Some hours later, I met Farmer Coles and his two sons returning from the sport, the youngest, a mere schoolboy, mounted on a pony, his head, as he rode, reaching scarce to his father's saddle-peak. He was in huge high spirits, displaying the brush, his share of the spoil, to all acquaintance as he passed. And the face of this yellow-haired, chubby child was bedaubed with blood, thick zebra-like streaks of it smudged across his smooth forehead and rosy baby cheeks. He was going home delighted, to show to an admiring mother how he had been 'blooded' at his first cub-hunt; and in all that country-side, I thought

to myself as I passed on, there was scarce a man or woman of station and breeding who would not have applauded son of theirs returning home in such a plight.

Nor, though at the time the thing filled me personally with genuine horror and loathing, did I condemn it, nor wish to see its like made impossible in the land. For the sybaritish, lotus-eating danger is too imminent in our midst for any such fabian trifling : it will be a woeful day for England when we have bred out of our young manhood the last instincts of the healthy brute.

I got into Runridge's skiff, in the absence of its owner, and pushed off into mid-stream, letting the little craft drift whither it would. Wind and tide together were setting strongly up-country. Swiftly the reedy banks glided by, as we bore through the meadows that lie at the foot of the hills. The summer was gone, indeed ; and gone with it that sense of striving towards achievement. The year seemed to be resting upon its oars, as I was doing. All its fruit was set : there remained nothing now but to wait and let it ripen. It was just this waiting and resting that made up autumn's greatest charm.

I set my elbows on my knees and my chin on my hands, and let the little boat choose a destiny for the idle pair of us. The bank was high to windward. We drifted in an almost unruffled

calm, while overhead there sailed by an unending cloud of thistle-down, tiny verticils of sunlit silver, each gleaming star-like against the morning blue. Most of them took the broad river at a stride, disappearing over the opposite bank, but many fell upon the water. Thousands of them floated around me, and as far as eye could reach the water was grey and misty with them. And this was only one nook of earth in innumerable miles. How was it, I asked of the wind above me, that with such inexhaustible store of thistle-seed, she could not sow the whole land thick with thistles in a single season, and drive all other things from the fields? The answer was to be obtained for the mere raising of a hand. For it is not the thistle-seed that flies, but only the harmless thistle-down. Moreover, among the millions of air-ships that each thistle-patch sends off upon the wind throughout a breezy autumn day, not one in fifty ever bore a seed, or, if bearing it, contrived to carry its burden more than a yard or two. The curved seed-pod of the thistle is attached to its feathery volute only by the slenderest thread, and is brushed off by the lightest touch of the first grass-blade as it sails low over the sward. But the thistle-down, lightened of its counterpoise, bowls on for ever.

OCTOBER

I

WITH each October in every year for a long time past, I have watched for the going of the martins, but have never yet contrived to witness the moment of their flight. It has always happened in the same way. One day they have been as busy as ever about the roof-eaves, their chattering song pervading the house unceasingly from dark to dark. And then a morning comes, generally towards the end of the first week in the month, when I awaken to a curious sense of strangeness and loss. First I mark the unwonted silence outside the windows, and then I guess what has come about. Looking forth, I see that the little mud-houses, huddled together in a long row under the eaves, are deserted and silent at last.

But to-day, though I missed the departure of the martins as usual, I was not wholly disappointed. Getting up in the new silence and throwing the windows back, I looked along the roof-edge. Save for the chipping and fluttering

of a few sparrows, there was nothing to be seen or heard in the dim grey light. But it seemed the little army could have been away only a few minutes before me, for while I looked, I saw the last of them depart. One single note of the remembered song broke out overhead ; there was a whir of wings, and the little black-and-white bird lanced straight off, going due south unhesitatingly, as though the vanished throng of her companions was yet visible far away in the skies.

It was a still, grey, warm morning. There had been no dew. Everything, as presently I went along by the wood-side, was quite dry ; and though it was barely eight o'clock, all the spiders in the bushes were hard at work weaving their snares. It was almost perfect spinning weather. On windy mornings, though the webs must be made, the task is difficult and the work seldom properly carried out. But to-day there was only a vague air moving from the south-west, and all the spiders had got to work betimes, and with light hearts.

The great charm in all nature study is to find out the truth for yourself at first hand. There are few things in my life I regret so keenly as the reading of nature books. This has robbed me of many a moment of pleasurable surprise ; for to recognise a commonly accepted fact is

poor substitute for its original discovery, although this discovery may have been made by others a thousand times before. Looking back over twenty years' poking and prying in the woods and fields round about Windlecombe, I rejoice not so much at the many things I have found out, but at the fact of so many things still unread of, and still remaining to be discovered. This morning, as I went along by the bushes in the lee of the wood, and saw the spiders at work, it suddenly occurred to me that I knew little or nothing about them ; and the recognition of this ignorance came to me as truest bliss. I fell to looking on at the ingenious, complicated work with almost as much anxiety and interest as the male spiders themselves.

For it appears to be only the female who spins a web. The big-bodied spider, so industriously occupied in every gap of the thicket, is always the female, though the male is never far off. You are sure to find him peering out from under one of the adjacent leaves, or treading timidly on the circumference of the web, trying to attract the attention, and thereafter, perhaps, the regard of its maker.

Spider nets and their weavers have, I think, never been given quite their place in the world of wonders. As far as human profit is concerned, spiders are useless things ; and have therefore

missed, because, from that standpoint, they have not merited, popular favour. But no doubt their ingenuity as craftswomen stands very nearly on a level with that of the worker honey-bee. The waxen comb of the bee, whose perfection is due to the combined arts of engineer, mason, and geometrician, is very little superior in design and carrying-out to the spider's web.

On these still, grey autumn mornings, the tendency of the eye is not to wander far afield, but to concern itself with the little things of the wayside close at hand; and so, more than at any other time of year, perhaps, the spiders and their ways come in for narrow scrutiny. And here is something, in the first loving investigation of which the uninformed, unread observer is much to be envied.

He notices in the outset that these fine silken snares, hung by the spiders in the hedgerows, are of two kinds—the one placed vertically across a gap in the surface of the thicket; the other placed horizontally, closing up some shaft or upward passage-way in the heart of the green bush. The vertical net is seen to be composed of a number of threads radiating from a common centre, and upon these threads an ever-increasing spiral line has been laid, forming a regular, meshed net. But the horizontal web has none of this geometric neatness. It is a mere expanse

of fine tissue irregularly woven into a sort of crazy pattern, and slung hammock fashion, completely closing the chimney-like hollow wherein it has been made. From a view of the finished webs, two other facts will be noted—the vertical net is supported only by lines springing from its circumference, and the spider sits at its centre in front; the horizontal net is suspended by numberless fine lines attached at all points in its upper surface, while the spider clings to the under side as she lies in wait for her prey.

But it is in the actual weaving of the nets that the interest of the onlooker will be chiefly centred. The maker of the vertical, or cartwheel, pattern of web begins operations in various ways, according to the conditions imposed upon her by the weather and the spot she has selected. Webs made in calm seasons, or when only light airs are stirring, will have few mainstays, and these may be of considerable length; but in windy times the spider will stretch her snare on only short hawsers, using as many as may be necessary to make assurance doubly sure. But in either case she will commence the work in much the same way.

First she goes to the highest point on the windward side of her gap, and turning her head to the current, begins to pay out a line behind her. As this floats out, she continually tries it with her

leg until she knows that the end of the line has caught in the opposite twigs. Then she runs to the middle of this horizontal line, dragging after her another thread which she has previously attached to her original starting-point. From the centre of the first line she lowers herself vertically, always dragging the second line in her rear, until she reaches a twig below. Here she draws her second line tight and fastens it, after which she climbs to the horizontal line and repeats the manoeuvre, only this time from its leeward end. Thus the triangle of mainstays—the first essential in all spider-web making—is complete.

The weaving of the net within this triangular frame is the next work undertaken. The spider, when she first dropped from the centre of her uppermost thread, made a vertical line in descending. Some point on this line marks the centre of the future cartwheel pattern of web, and this central point the spider now finds unerringly, and begins to put in one by one the radiating spokes of the wheel. When all these spokes are in place, she returns to the centre, and revolving her body quickly, she forms upon it a close spiral of four or five turns. This is to be her seat and watch-tower, whence she will keep the whole web under observation. Having done this, she now—if the morning is at all breezy—carries

temporary stay-lines from spoke to spoke all round the web, these isolated circles of thread occurring at intervals of an inch or so between centre and circumference. But on still mornings this part of her work is omitted as unnecessary, and she proceeds at once to the main spinning of the net.

The construction of the cross-threads between the spokes of the web is always commenced at the extreme outer edges of the space to be filled ; and the spider works inwardly, carrying the thread round and round from spoke to spoke until she arrives within half an inch or so of the central small spiral. But the two are never joined : an interval is always left where the web consists of nothing but bare radiating lines. The snare is now finished. The spider takes up her station in the middle of the net, with no more to do for the rest of the day but take what fair chance, and her own crafty ingenuity, may provide.

Yet, having thus watched the making of a spider-web from start to finish, and having noted all the details of construction here set down, there is something more about the matter which, if it escape the observer, will leave him in the rather disgraceful plight of having missed the most wonderful thing of all.

The spider's snare is not woven throughout of

the same kind of thread. Two kinds are used, and the difference between them is apparent even to eyes of very moderate power. While the triangle and the radiating lines are made of plain silk, the cross-threads are corrugated, and look like strings of tiny, transparent beads. A touch of the finger will prove that these beads are really adhering drops of some glutinous fluid, whose use is not difficult to guess. But how do the beads get on the line, seeing that this, when first drawn from the spider's body, is visibly nothing but a plain filament of silk, like the rest of the web?

The question has been asked many times, and the answer commonly given is, I have come to believe, an entirely erroneous one. We are told that the thread used for the cross-bars in a spider's web, when it first emerges from the creature's body, is only smeared, not beaded with the gluten; but that after attaching each segment of the spiral to the spokes, the spider gives it a twang with her foot, thus causing the gluten to separate into beads. Here then is a fact such as one would read in the nature books, and unquestionably accept. But a little independent experiment with various kinds of strings, elastic or non-elastic, and smeared with different glutinous substances, reveals the fact that no amount of twanging will induce the latter to

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divide into beads, such as one sees in the spider line. In every case, the tendency of the gluten in the experiment is to fly off altogether, or to gather to one side of the string.

But to any that desires to know the truth of the thing, the spider herself will speedily resolve the difficulty. Watch her at work, and it will soon be seen that the beads are formed on the line not by twanging, but by stretching. At the moment each length of sticky thread is drawn from the spider's spinnerets, it is destitute of beads. But the spider quickly stretches it out to nearly double its original length, and then as quickly slackens it; whereupon, before she has well had time to fasten the thread in its place, the beads will be seen to have formed themselves throughout its entire length.

II

Said Miss Susan Angel this evening, as I leant over the counter of her little dark shop, studying the rows of sweetstuff bottles beyond: 'Th' chillern here, 'tis real astonishin' how changeable they be. One time 'tis all lickrich wi' em, an' next 'tis all sherbet-suckers, an' then maybe 'tis nought but toffee-balls for weeks on end. But you!'—she turned me a glance full of smiling, proud approbation—'You!—come

winter or summer, come rain or shine, I allers knaws 'twill be nobbut black-fours !'

She reached down the ancient glass jar, and stabbed at its contents ruminatively with an iron fork.

'Black-fours—ah!' she mused, as the shining magpie lumps rattled into the brass scale-pan. 'An' I never smells 'em but I thinks o' my ould missus as—— Lorey me! how many long year ago! Fond on 'em, wur she? Ah! an' scrunch 'em up, 'a could, quicker 'n e'er wan wi' a nateral jaw!'

'What kind of jaw, then, had she, Susan?'

'Ah! I believe ye! My dear! th' money as ut costed! All gold, an' ivory-like, an' red stuff! An' when 'a died—— Did never I show 'em to ye?'

She disappeared into the little ichten behind the shop. I heard a drawer unlocked; there was a sound of rummaging, accompanied by asthmatic interjections; Miss Susan Angel came forth again bearing a bulky parcel. This, as she removed various coverings, became smaller and smaller until, from a final wrapping of tissue-paper, there appeared a beautiful double set of false teeth. Miss Angel held them up to my gaze admiringly.

'Left 'em to me, 'a did! 'Twur all writ in her will——"To my faithful servant an' friend,

Susan Angel, I give an' bequeath"—an' all th' rest on 't. Ah! bless her an' rest her sowl!

It seemed rather an appropriate legacy, for Miss Angel had possessed not a single tooth of her own in all the years I had known her. But the display of the treasure provoked a very natural commentary.

'How long have you had these put by, Susan?'

'Nigh upon thirty year, my dear.'

'And never used them yourself all that time, although you——'

'What!' The old lady drew herself up, the youthful blue eyes in her wrinkled face flashing indignation. 'What d'ye say!—me use 'em? *Me?* Th' very same as my dear ould missus chawed wi'? Shame on ye! Not if there was nought to eat but cracking-nuts left i' th' wureld fer us all!'

I took the rebuke in penitent silence. When she had restored the revered relics to their locker in the back room, she resumed her knitting in the great wicker chair behind the counter. In a minute or two she had alike forgiven me and forgotten the cause of her displeasure, as I knew from her tone.

'How the evenin's do draw in, to be sure!' she observed, laying down her work. 'A'most dark, ut be, though 'tis no more 'n six o'clock.'

The ancient timepiece in the corner promptly

droned out eleven. Miss Angel clapped her hands.

'What did I tell ye?' she said triumphantly. 'Wunnerful good time 'a keeps, when I recollects to putt un back reg'lar.'

She rose and reversed the hands for a circle or two.

'That 'll do till mornin',' said she placidly. 'Ye warnts to be a little particler i' country places: ut bean't like i' towns where—— Gipsies! I do believe! An' this time o' night, to be sure!'

I followed her sudden glance to the doorway. A heavy grinding of wheels had sounded outside, and across our field of view, silhouetted against the deep turquoise blue of the night, there passed what looked like a gipsies' caravan. A bony horse toiled in the shafts, and a long lean man walked in front, dragging at the animal's bridle with almost as much apparent effort. Lights shone from the windows of the vehicle, and its chimney smoked voluminously against the stars. As it went by, we could see another man sitting upon the steps in its rear, his squat bulky form entirely blocking the open door-place. The caravan pulled up about midway over the green.

'Now, that wunt do!' observed Miss Angel decisively. 'We warnts nane o' they sort traipsing about Windlecombe after dark, least-

ways not them as keeps chicken. 'Tis on your road hoame : jest gie 'em a wured as you goos by, my dear. Tell 'em as you warnts to save trouble fer th' policeman.'

In nowise intending to disturb the gipsies, I nevertheless took the short cut over the green, passing in the darkness close by their queer, spindle-shanked, top-heavy dwelling. As I cut through the beam of light that poured from the doorway, a suave voice hailed me.

'Hi! my man! Just a moment! Now, Grewes, your difficulty is at an end. I have intercepted one of the inhabitants, and doubtless he will—— Yes : inquire of him—very politely now—where we may obtain water.'

The long lean man had blundered into the light beside me, carrying two pails. He was clothed in little better than rags from head to foot. A massive gold watch-chain glittered across his buttonless waistcoat. He turned upon me two gaunt, diffident eyes.

'Water,' he hesitated, holding out the pails helplessly before him. 'Water, you know! Could you be so kind as to——'

The suave, flute-like voice sounded again from the depths of the caravan.

'Now, Grewes! if I am to carry out the little supper scheme I explained to you, no time must be lost. When once they are peeled, potatoes

should never——' The owner of the voice appeared in the doorway. 'Dear, dear! My good fellow! there you are, still standing there; and I fully impressed it upon you that if rabbit is permitted to bake one moment longer than—— Grewes! give me those pails!'

But the long lean man had drawn me precipitately away. As we hurried across the green together in the direction of the well-house, he seemed to consider himself under some necessity of explanation.

'It is his caravan,' he said, 'Spelthorne's, you know. And I am travelling with him for a bit, because I was run down, and—and other things. One of the best fellows breathing, he is, though you mightn't—I mean I so often forget what I—— Of course, I really don't wonder that sometimes he—— Why! I have forgotten to unharness the horse! Do remind me—will you?—when we get back; but quietly, you understand? Spelthorne, he is the best fellow breathing, but—— Oh, is this the well? It is most kind of you, I'm sure!'

He seemed in so strained and nervous a mood that I did not trust him to handle the heavy bucket and chain, nor to return unaided to the caravan with his burden. When we drew into the beam of light again, I could see Spelthorne inside, stooping over the little cooking-stove in

his shirt-sleeves and a great sombrero. If anything, his clothes were even more tattered and soiled than his companion's. At sound of our clanking pails he turned, stared, then swept me a low bow with the sombrero.

'Thoughtless, very thoughtless!—indeed, most selfish of Grewes!' he said confidentially, for the long lean man had hurried away to attend to the horse. 'A good fellow, such a good fellow, you cannot think! But he has this little failing of sometimes taking advantage of any kindness that—— But excuse me: I must get the potatoes on!'

I had hardly gone a dozen paces towards home, when I heard him pounding after me.

'What is—the name,' he asked breathlessly, 'of—of this village?' And when I had told him: 'There are beautiful old cottages here, are there not? And quaint people? And charming country round about? Such a spot—isn't it?—where two artists could find incessant inspiration, and—and——'

But the question had been put to me before, and too often.

'Well, I don't know,' said I discouragingly. 'The place is very quiet and humdrum, and most inconvenient—no railway and no roads to anywhere and——'

'The very place!' he broke in delightedly.

' I shall persuade poor Grewes to remain here with me a month.'

And when I took a last look at the night some hours after, I beheld the faint glow, from the windows of the caravan upon the green, with dismal foreboding. A month of that prospect ! And not only that, but something worse ; for, upon the wings of the slow night wind, there drifted over to me the mournful thrumming of a guitar.

III

As it has turned out, the caravanners have proved very little trouble to any, and to myself least of all. In a day or two, they moved down to the riverside, choosing one of the wildest and leafiest corners of the old abandoned chalk-quarry ; and for a week past I have seen nothing of them but a wisp of blue smoke from afar.

And, indeed, October in the country, if your design is to keep step and step with the month through all its bewildering changes, leaves you but scanty leisure for social traffic with your kind. Every day now there is something new to wonder at, and ponder over.

To-day the gossamer was flying. If you stood in one of the low-lying sheltered meadows, and turned your back to the light, the air seemed full

of these ashen-grey flecks, some only the merest threads, others of the breadth of a finger and several inches long. I have always believed that the gossamer spiders sit in the hedgerows spinning these fairy diaperies, and letting them go upon the breeze to little more use and purpose than when a child blows soap-bubbles for the mere delight of watching them soar. At least, what end could possibly be served by them, other than the sufficient and obvious one of bringing a note of austere, chilly delicacy into the riotous colour of an October day? But idling along this morning with literally thousands of these grey filaments tempering the rich gold of the sunshine far and near, I chanced to stretch forth a hand and capture one of them. Between my fingers there hung a shred of fabric infinitely finer than anything that ever came from loom devised by man; and within it sat the gossamer spider herself, a shining black atom, evidently vastly surprised and alarmed at the sudden termination of her flight. After that I pulled down a score or so of these gossamer air-ships, and although a few were tenantless, the most of them bore a passenger embarked on, who shall say how long and how hazardous a voyage? Yet, while none fell to earth as I watched, but seemed to have the power of rising ever higher and higher, it is certain that the gossamer

spider's flight must end with each day's sun. The heavy autumn dews must sweep the air clear of them at first tinge of dusk.

If there is anything in the old saying that a plentiful berry harvest foretells a hard winter, then have we bitter times in store. The hedges are loaded with scarlet wherever you go, and yet in all this flaunting brilliance there seems to be no two shades of red alike. The holly-berries approach more nearly than any to pure vermilion. Then come the hips, the rose-berries, with their tawny red; and the haws that are richer of hue than all others, perhaps, yet of a sombreness that quietens the eye for all its glow. Ruddy are the bryonies and the bittersweet. The rowans love to hold aloft their masses of pure flame, the rich rowan-colour that is always seen against the sky. Along the edge of the hazel copse, where the butcher's broom grows, its curious oblong fruit gives another note of red. But they are all essentially different colours. Nature often duplicates herself in blues, yellows, and particularly in a certain shade of pale purple, of which the mallow is a common type. But among red flowers, red berries, finding one, you shall not find its exact counterpart in hue in all the country-side.

In southern England, the general lurid effect due to change of leafage in the forest trees

belongs of right to November, but already there are abundant signs of what is coming. Though the woods, on a distant view, still look gloriously green, a nearer prospect reveals a touch of autumn in almost every tree. In the beech-woods nearly all the branches are tipped with brown. The elms have bright yellow patches oddly dispersed amidst foliage still of almost summer-like freshness. The willows by the river are full of golden pencillings. Only the oaks remain as yet uninfluenced by the changing times. The temperate autumn nights, that have checked the sap-flow of less hardy things, have had no influence on the oak-woods. They wait for the first real frosts—the knock-down blow.

And strangely, though October is nearing its end, the frosts do not come. The nights are still, moist, dark ; and full of the twanging note of dor-beetles, and now and again the steady whirl of passing wings. This is the sound made by the hosts of migrant birds, all journeying southward, travelling in silence and by stealth of night.

Coming out into the darkness, and hearing this mighty rushing note high overhead, you get a queer sense of underhand activity and concealed purpose in the world, as though scenery were being swiftly changed, a new piece hurriedly staged, under cover of the blinked lights. It tends towards a feeling that is rather foreign, not

to say humbling, to your desires—that of being made a spectator rather than a participant in the great earth play. Or it may have another and a stranger effect. The sound of all that strenuous motion, the deep travel-note high in the darkness, may come to you with all the urging inspiration of a summons: you may restrain only with difficulty, and much assembling of prudence, the impulse to gird up and be off southward in the track of the flying host. The old nomadic instinct is not dead in humanity, as he well knows who keeps his feet to the green places of earth, and his heart tiding with the sun.

Now, too, the brown owl begins his hollow plaint in the woodlands. 'Woo-hoo-hoo, woo-hoo!' comes to you through the fast-falling dusk, the direction and intensity of the cry varying with astonishing swiftness, as you stop to listen on your homeward way. This is conceivably the 'to-whoo' that Shakespeare heard; and there is another note, which seems to be an answer to it, and which sounds something like 'Ker-wick,' and might by a stretch be allowed to stand for the 'to-whit' in the song. But 'to-whit, to-whoo!' in a single phrase, from a single throat—that seems to be a piece of owl language that has become obsolete with the centuries.

There is a stretch of lane here, running between high grassy banks densely overshadowed by trees, which is always dark on the clearest nights of any season, but of a Cimmerian blackness on these moonless evenings in late October. As if they knew their opportunity for service, the glowworms often light up the place from end to end, so that it is possible, steering by their tiny lamps alone, to keep out of the ditch that yawns invisibly on either hand. I came through the lane this evening, and counted near upon a score of these vague blotches of greenish radiance hovering amidst the dew-soaked grass, each bright enough to show the time by a watch held near. As long as I can remember, glowworms have been plentiful in this stretch of dark, overshadowed lane, and very scarce in all other quarters of the village. New colonies of glowworms seem difficult to establish, although single lights do appear in places where they have not been seen before, and in ensuing year appear again and again, generally in slowly increasing numbers. It is not wonderful that glowworms should keep to the same grassy bank season after season, because, as all countrymen know, it is only the lampless male that flies. The female, who bears the light, and on whom the persistence of the race depends, lives and dies probably within no more than the same few square yards

of tangled herbage. What seems really wonderful is that single glowworms of the female sex should occur in places far removed from old resorts of their kind, seeing how feeble are their means, and how slow their rate, of travel.

I have said that the flocks of birds that can sometimes be heard in the quiet of October nights, passing seaward over the village, are generally silent, save for the dull, pulsating roar of their wings. As I lifted the latch of the garden-gate to-night, and stood a moment listening in the darkness, the old sound grew out of the silence of the hills, and there went swiftly by what seemed only a small flock; but now and again, as they passed, I could hear a note bandied to and fro in the company, a chuckling, voluble note, which I recognised instantly. They were fieldfares, the first-comers of their species. From now onward, I knew, their queer outlandish cry would mingle with the common sounds of the fields; and not only theirs, but the notes of all other foreign birds that winter here; for the fieldfare is generally the last to come.

This cry in the darkness above me, however, was strange in a double sense; because, while the silent hosts were emigrants, only at the commencement of their long, perilous journey, this chattering company had safely arrived at its bourne, all the hazards of the voyage happily

past. And it seemed only in the way of Nature, for bird or man, to set forth mute of voice upon a difficult and dangerous enterprise; while to win through safe and sound must provoke each alike to self-congratulation. My fieldfares were halloaing because they were out of the wood.

NOVEMBER

I

'No mirth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feel in any member ;
No warmth, no shine, no butterflies, no bees—
November !'

IT was the old vicar of Windlecombe who ironically quoted the lines, as we went along our favourite path together—the path that runs between Arun river and the woods.

The first frosts had come and gone, and left us in the midst of the usual revolutions and surprises. In a single day, the ash-trees had cast their whole weight of foliage to earth, green as in summer prime. Though as yet not a single leaf had fallen from the other forest trees, all had changed miraculously. The beech-woods looked like vast smouldering fires. Every elm stood up clothed to its finger-tips in shreds of gold-leaf. Here and there in the wood a dash of vivid scarlet showed where a sycamore had been found and struck by the frost. Larch, willow, maple, birch, each added to the glowing

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prospect its individual shade of tawny brown, or drab, or yellow. We walked in a land where, for once, the sunshine seemed a superfluous thing. To turn the eye away for a little while from all that intolerable radiance, and rest it on the oak-woods where alone a vestige of summer greenery endured, or on the cool grey stems of the stripped ash-trees, was a pleasure I found myself furtively snatching as we went along, although I left the sentiment discreetly unexpressed. The old vicar stopped, removed his great white panama, and mopped his forehead luxuriously.

‘No warmth, no shine!’ he repeated. ‘Now where in the world could the poor soul have lived who wrote that? And no bees! Why, I can hear them now—thousands of them!’

It was true enough, and with the bees were the November butterflies too, if he could only have seen them. In a sunny corner by the path-side stood an old pollard ash, its trunk rearing up out of the thicket high over our heads, like a huge doubled fist thrust into a green gauntlet of ivy. It was only one tree among innumerable others in the wood, and the same stirring scene was enacting round each of them. Though with everything else the season was autumn, for the ivy it was the heyday of spring. The great tree above us was smothered in golden blossom, the nectar glistening in the sunshine, a rich honey

scent burdening the still air. There were not only hive-bees and butterflies rioting at this, the last outdoor feast of the year, but bumble-bees, wasps, drone-flies, every other creature that could fly and had escaped the chills of the November nights. The air was misty with the glint of their wings, and full of a deep sweet song. As we passed along by the wood, we were always either drawing into the zone of this ivy music or leaving it behind us, and never once did it forsake our path all the morning through.

We came at last to a spot where the woods fell back from the waterside, and a stretch of wild, hillocky grassland, overgrown with brier and bramble, bordered the stream. Between the willows that stood upon the bank dipping their yellow autumn tresses in the flood, I could see the placid breadth of the river, with its topsyturvy vision of the glowing hills beyond—hills that, by reason of the interlacing boughs above, were directly invisible. A lark broke up almost from under our feet, and went slanting aloft into the blue sky, singing as though it were April. The Reverend put a hand upon my arm.

‘ Well : what do you see ? ’ he asked. ‘ Everything must be changed since we were here last, and——’

‘ I see,’ said I, rather disturbed, ‘ a painter’s easel straddled in front of your favourite creek—an easel with a three-legged stool before it, but no painter. I see also, a little farther on, a big white umbrella, with the top of a sombrero just showing above it, and a great cloud of tobacco smoke drifting out of it, but here again no other sign of painter or man. Shall we go back ?’

But he was for pushing on. As we approached the umbrella, a throaty tenor voice was uplifted to a weird foreign strain :—

‘ En passant par Square Montholon,
La digue-digue donc ! la digue-digue donc !
Je rencontre une jeune tendron !
La digue-digue——

‘ Superb ! *Sw*-perb ! If only I could excite myself to—— Ah ! if only that tumultuous thrill, which I know always presages——

‘ la digue-digue donc !
J’offre tout de suite ma main—ye
La brigue-donc-dain-ye——’

Or at least so the gibberish sounded. But now it suddenly left off. A palette went rattling to the ground. The short squat figure of the owner of the caravan burst into view.

‘ Grewes ! I cannot do it, I really cannot ! I

am not sufficiently inspired to-day! I am not great enough! I—— Oh! I beg your pardon! I thought it was my friend's step. Why! the water-bearer, to be sure! How do you do?'

It was my first glimpse of Spelthorne by light of day, and I owned to myself frankly that the night had been kind to him. A fringe of yellow-grey hair escaped in all directions beyond the brim of his hat. He had a florid, puffy, indeterminate face, eyes at once selfish and sentimental, and a week-old beard still further ostracised a chin already too retiring. Like his companion, he wore a gold watch-chain of heavy calibre, with a bunch of seals and trinkets upon it; but his clothes, that in the darkness had seemed much tattered and torn, now appeared entirely disreputable. They were, moreover, covered with finger-marks of paint, to which he was now adding, as he ceremoniously welcomed us.

'Art—what is it?' he cried, removing his hat, and running his fingers through his hair, when presently, at his earnest invitation, the Reverend had sat himself down before the easel, and was making a grave show of inspecting the canvas on it. 'And the artist—where is he?' He made a dramatic pause.

'Where indeed?' quoth the Reverend, grimly staring before him.

' You see this picture ? '—wagging a chrome-yellow thumb over the canvas—' nine-tenths of it are the work of one exalted day : the rest the unilluminated toil of a week ! Strange that we should be made so ! At one moment, like Prometheus, stealing the very fire from heaven, and at the next—— Ah ! but only an artist can really comprehend ! '

He filled his pipe, with a resigned, quiet sadness.

' Now Grewes—that is my friend who is travelling with me—' he went on ; ' Grewes, poor fellow, he never realises the difficulties in his path because—because— Let me put it in the kindest way. Because—well, the truth is, poor Grewes has mistaken his calling. No better fellow in the world, you know ! A hard plodder : always trying, always doing his best ; but—but—— You see, that brings us back to what I said just now : art and the artist—where will you find them ? and what are they ? ' .

A slight cough sounded in our rear. Looking round, I saw that the long lean man had returned to his easel unmarked by any of us. The Reverend got abruptly to his feet.

' Well,' said he, ' you have a great responsibility. Supreme gifts in a man mean that much will be required of him. So bend your back to it. Good day ! '

As we passed by the other easel, its owner looked up pleasantly, but his brush kept busily to work.

'Don't go yet,' he entreated, 'I am so glad to—— But you won't mind, will you, if I go on with—— You see, I have not had very long at it this morning. Spelthorne, he was getting so anxious about the stew, that I—I had to run back to the caravan and—— Or else he would have—— It wouldn't have done, of course, to let him go himself. When once he has got into the mood, the slightest little thing——'

He rambled on thus, scarcely ever finishing a sentence, and all the while dabbing away industriously at his sketch. He, too, I had never yet beheld in daylight; but, unlike his friend, sunshine rather improved his appearance than otherwise. It could not fill up the gaps in his coat, nor had it a lustrating effect upon his linen; yet it revealed in his long, cadaverous face, and in his mild, sad eyes, a delicacy, a sensibility, that I had not remarked in them before. As he talked, the old vicar studied his voice attentively.

'Spelthorne,' he went on, in his curious, disjointed, breathless way, 'Spelthorne, his work is so immeasurably—— He has such a demand for it that—— And I am always so glad, of course, to do any little thing to save him trouble.

I—I really think no man in the world ever had a better friend.'

The Reverend was standing close behind him now. He laid a hand gently on Grewes's dilapidated shoulder.

'Don't hurry,' he said, 'at least don't hurry with your mind. Above all, don't worry: it is all coming beautifully. When did you see your doctor last?'

The question, unexpected as it was by myself, seemed to surprise Grewes infinitely more. The blood got up into two bright points in his cheeks. His brushes rattled against his palette. He looked round at the old vicar tremulously.

'Doctor? Why, do you—— What makes you think I—— Oh! I am very well indeed; never better.'

He stopped, looking up into the sightless, kindly blue eyes that appeared to be as steadily gazing down into his. There was a moment's silence. And then, if I ever saw real untrammelled joy spring into a human face, I saw it in his.

'Do you really think so?' he cried. 'You think I—— Well, sometimes lately I have thought myself that——'

Spelthorne's voice grumbled out from behind the umbrella.

'Now, my dear Grewes, have I not frequently

told you that, though I am willing to lend you anything I have, I always expect——'

Grewes sprang to his feet.

'It is his cadmium,' he whispered, horrified. 'I borrowed it, and never—— How very annoying for him!'

'Now there is a strange thing,' said the Reverend musingly, as we trudged on our way together. 'A man well on in a rapid decline, and neither knowing nor caring about it; as glad, indeed, to hear the thing confirmed as if some one had left him a legacy! A month, did you say? Then he may never go out of Windlecombe by the road.'

We made a long day's round, taking meadow, riverside, wood, and downland in our walk, and reaching home again only when the lights were beginning to star the misty combe; for we had a special object in our journey. To the townsman it may well seem as fruitless a task to seek wild flowers in November, as to go 'gathering nuts in May.' Well, here is a list of what we found in one November day's ramble about a single village in highland Sussex—fifty-seven distinct species, and of many we could have gathered, not single flowers, but whole handfuls, had we willed. Nor is the list an exhaustive one either for the district or the time of year. Bringing more eyesight, leisure, and diligence to

the task, no doubt a fuller inventory could be made in any mild season.—

Dandelion.	Hawkweed.	Strawberry.
Furze.	Penny Cress.	Teasel.
Red Dead-nettle.	Hedge Mustard.	Sun Spurge.
White Dead-nettle.	Knapweed.	Dwarf Spurge.
Marguerite.	Mallow.	Hedge Parsley.
Poppy.	Harebell.	Rock-rose.
Musk Thistle.	Daisy.	Crane's-bill.
Charlock.	Hogweed.	Heather.
Buttercup.	Yarrow.	Betony.
Red Clover.	Sheepsbit.	Viper's Bugloss.
White Clover.	Marjoram.	Burnet Saxifrage.
Pimpernel.	Cudweed.	Sow-thistle.
Calamint.	Groundsel.	Wild Pansy.
Blackberry.	Nipplewort.	Shepherd's Purse.
Mayweed.	Small Bindweed.	Herb-Robert.
Field Madder.	Ragwort.	Nonsuch.
Sandwort.	Silverweed.	Ivy.
White Campion.	Persicary.	Chickweed.
Red Campion.	Mouse-ear.	Veronica.

II

There has come a spell of chilly, overcast weather, and the long dark evenings have settled upon us at a stroke. At twilight to-day, as I came into this silent-floored, comfortable room, and lit the candles on my work-table, it seemed strange that I should do so, and yet the ordinary life and traffic of the village be still going on

outside. Hitherto, so it appeared, the village quiet had fallen always before the need for candle-light. I had looked out before drawing the curtains close, and heard not a step stirring, seen the windows dark in the lower storeys of the cottages, and here and there a pale light glimmering behind the drawn blinds of upper rooms, for your true Sussex villager hates to sleep in the dark. But to-night some new order of things seemed to have been suddenly ordained. Foot-steps hurried or leisurely, voices old and young, the rumble of wheels, even the distant chime of Tom Clemmer's hammer—all the sounds that go to make up the common rumour of work-a-day life in a village, were abroad in the air; though already the hills were lost in the gloaming: the white chrysanthemums by the garden-gate were nothing but a dim blotch on the murky autumn night.

I lit the candles—home-made candles of yellow beeswax—and set them on their little mats of plaited green leather. I got out a new quire of foolscap, sobering in its empty whiteness, its word-hungry look. I arranged the ruler, the old cut-glass inkpot, the painted leaden frog that serves for paperweight, the elephant that carries a penwiper as houdah, ash-tray and tobacco-jar and sheaf of favourite pipes, all in their proper stations. I drew the old oak elbow-chair side-

ways to the table—sideways because that was non-committal: too squarely business-like an approach in the outset, as I know of old time and cost, often scatters the fairies into the next county, and you may chew to shreds a whole quiverful of goose-quills before they again come crowding and whispering curiously about your ears.

But having made all these exact preparations, I chanced to turn to the open window for a final look down the street, and knew at once that I was lost. It was the steady far-off song from Tom Clemmer's anvil that overcame me more than anything, and the red glow amidst the elder-boughs that overhung the forge. But all else conspired in one basilisk-like lure to get me forth. The busy wending to and fro, and the cheery commerce of tongues in the darkness, footsteps and voices that I knew as well as I knew my own; twinkling lights in cottages, the illumined windows of the little sweetstuff shop, the cobbler's den, the inn, the village store; the church lit up for evensong, and the bell quietly tolling, as it seemed, somewhere far up in the black void of the sky; again, the smell of the night, that moist, earthy fragrance of decaying leaves, and tang of frost, and pungent scent of simmering fire-logs from stacks new-broached on these first chilly evenings in November—it

all ranged itself together before me as something, ever present and constant in my life, that I too often disregarded, took for granted—the jumble of thatch and red-tiled roof and grey flint wall, sheep and lowing kine and cackling poultry, bevy of kindly human hearts, sharp tongues and willing hands, all wedged up together in one green crevice of the hills, and calling themselves collectively by the old South-Saxon name of Windlecombe.

I went first of all a few strides out over the green and looked backward, rightly to estimate, if I could, my own part in the little communal symphony. The bluff bulk of the house, with its coven roof and many gables, stood dark against the greyer darkness of the hills, and behind it rose sable elm plumes fast thinning under the recent autumn chills. From its windows shone lights of varying significance. There were my own red-shaded candles with a corner of a crammed bookcase dimly visible above them; there were naked kitchen lights with ware of polished pewter and copper glinting behind, and a pleasant clatter of crockery; there was a window where the light burnt red and low and wavering as from a spent hearth, and a quiet ripple of music from a piano keeping it congenial company; there was the window high up in the great gable, whose flickering light cast a bunch

of head-shadows on the ceiling, suggestive of nursery bedtime, and fairy-tales round the fire. It was all very reassuring and enheartening. Yes : the old White House had its integral part to play in this good English game of Neighbourhood, and played it passing well.

Round Tom Clemmer's forge a group of village lads was gathered, all looking on at the work with an interest that amounted well-nigh to fascination. As I came up, and stood unobserved in the shadow of the elder-tree, there was before me a picture in which two colours only were represented—glowing crimson and deep velvety black. Young Tom stood, pincers in hand, watching the iron in the fire. Behind him his apprentice laboured at the bellows. With every wheezy puff, the furnace roared out an imprecation, and spat hot cinders upon the floor.

It was a large piece of metal that Tom had in work, something out of the ordinary run of his business, it seemed, and he turned it and shifted it with an anxious eye. No one spoke a word, for somehow we all knew that a crisis was coming, and we were expected to hold our tongues until it was victoriously past. At length the moment came. Tom thrust the pincers into the blaze and drew the white-hot iron out upon the anvil. Immediately the apprentice left the bellows,

seized a great hammer, and swinging it over his head, began to let fall on the metal an unceasing rain of mighty blows. As Tom twisted and manœuvred the glowing mass about with all the strength of his wiry arms, it lengthened, squared itself in the middle, flattened out at each end, bent into complicated curves, then turned upon itself and was united miraculously head to tail. Still gripping the writhing thing with one hand, Tom took a punch in the other, and pointed it to various parts of the work; and wherever he pointed, the hammer drove a bolt-hole clean and true through the rose-red iron. Finally Tom lifted the finished piece above his head, and came striding to the door with it. The crowd of on-lookers scattered right and left. Out into the darkness he plunged, and straight to the pool by the roadside. We saw the thing poised for a moment like a mammoth fire-fly over the water; and then, with a roar and an angry splutter, it vanished into the pond.

It was scarcely six o'clock, and already the night was pitch-black, with a creeping, chilly air from the north. It was not loitering weather. People were moving briskly on their several ways. Cottage doors were shut, and windows diamonded with moisture. Roving about with no settled purpose but to humour the neighbourly fancy, and to identify myself with the evening life of

the place, I presently came full tilt at a corner upon Farmer Coles.

'The very man!' said he, barring the way jovially with his stout oak stick. 'Didn't ye promise me that when I killed that four-year-old wether, ye 'd come and take a bite along o' us? Well, 'tis a saddle to-night, and I was on the road to fetch ye. Round about, man, and straight for the faarm!'

Now, when a South-Down flock-master—whose pedigree sheep are famous throughout the county—bids you to his table, with the announcement that the principal dish is to be mutton, there is only one thing to do, that is, if you are human, and of sane mind. I turned and went along with him without demur.

'Jane's sister and her man be with us,' said Farmer Coles, as we left the village behind and mounted the steep lane that led to the farmhouse. 'And Weaverly 'ull be there; and the gells be home, so we wunt lack for company. I don't know as ye ever met Jane's sister's man?—Parrett by name. No? Wunnerful well-eddicated man, though, he be.'

We found the Rev. Mr. Weaverly, a shining gem of purest water, set in the ring of hearty country faces that surrounded the drawing-room fire. The broad-shouldered, broad-faced man, with a mat of sandy beard and a very bald head,

who occupied the great armchair in the corner, I judged to be Mr. Parrett. Mrs. Coles and her sister, both comfortable of mien and rigidly ceremonious of visage, sat side by side in flowing black silk gowns, knitting as for a wager. The younger members of the household, who filled the interspaces of the circle, fidgeted in a constraint of merry silence, exchanging covert glances of boredom, and all obviously pricking ears for the first sound of the dinner-gong. This clanged out behind us almost at the moment of our entry into the room, providentially cutting short the first amenities of greeting; and before my fingers had done aching from Mr. Parrett's grip, I found myself sitting at the loaded board with Mrs. Parrett's voluminous drapery overflowing me on the one side, and, on the other, her husband's great brown barricade of an elbow securely fencing me in.

'Mutton,' observed Mr. Weaverly presently, by way of filling up a pause in the conversation due to our all watching with secret anxiety Farmer Coles's attack on the joint, 'mutton, and on a Monday! You remember the little game of alliteration we played at the school treat, Mrs. Coles? Really, we could make an admirable sequence here! Mutton, and Monday, and Miss Matilda sitting by my side, and—and—if it were only March instead of——'

‘ And we ’ll soon all be munchin’ of it, sir ! ’ cried Farmer Coles. ‘ Ha, ha, ha ! That ’s the best Hem o’ all ! Gravy, George ? ’

At the inclusion of her name in the sequence, the eldest Miss Coles had blushed, then let her glance demurely droop upon her chrysanthemum-wreathed bosom. It was a moment of exceeding pride and satisfaction to her, for here was Mr. Weaverly beside her—an incontestable, a beautiful fact—while Miss Sweet for once was half a mile away. Now she looked up coyly.

‘ I think,’ she hesitated, ‘ I could suggest a—— Oh ! I know a lovely one ! ’

Mr. Weaverly laid down knife and fork, to rub his hands delightedly.

‘ Do tell us ! ’ he murmured. ‘ I am positively longing to——’

The eldest Miss Coles turned him glamorous eyes.

‘ Marmaduke ! ’ she said.

And I think I was the only one present to realise the whole ingenuity of the manœuvre. For she had contrived here, in the open family circle, before a dozen people, yet with entire meetness and propriety, to address Mr. Weaverly by his Christian name.

As the meal progressed, and tongues became generally loosened, Mr. Parrett—whose silence, except as regarded his hearty application to his

food, had so far remained unbroken—now essayed to contribute his share of the talk. His first effort was a startling one.

‘D-d-d——’ he began, smiling over his shoulder at me, ‘d-do you l-l-l——’ He stopped, and gazed helplessly towards his wife.

‘Like, dear?’ suggested Mrs. Parrett, softly.

‘N-no! I was a-going t-t-to ask ye if ye l-l-l——’

‘Lend, then?’

‘Hur, hur! Emma, I don’t want to b-b-borrow nauthin’ o’ the gentleman! It was just to ask if he l-l-lived—there y’ are!—in W-w-w—— Whatsay, Jane?’

‘’Tis apple-pie, George. Or maybe ye’d sooner try the——’

‘Pie, Jane! Pie, my d-dear! Pie, if *you* please, mum! An’ a double dose o’ sh-sh-shuggar. They allers says—don’t they, sir?—as if a man has a sweet-t-t-t——’

‘Sweetheart, dear?’

‘Oo, ay!’ laughed Mr. Parrett, suddenly inspired. He looked across the table roguishly at Mr. Weaverly and Matilda, and all glances followed his. ‘Ah, well: n-n-never mind! We was all young once, and——’

Mrs. Coles deftly drew the fire of attention away from the absorbed, unconscious pair.

‘William, dear; Emma has nothing in her glass.

And there you sit, staring at the cheese as if—as if it were only for show, and as wooden as you are! And do pray pass the old ale to Mr.—’

‘Oh, deplorably, deplorably so!’ sighed Mr. Weaverly to the rapt Matilda. ‘Over and over again I have remonstrated with her, but all in vain, I fear. Each time I have said, “Mrs. Gates, if you will feed little children on new hot bread, and red herrings, and”—only think of it!—“beer, you will find not only their physical but their moral nature entirely——”’

It is strange how, in a room full of heterogeneous talk, the attention of a quiet listener flits uncontrollably from one quarter to another. Much as I was interested in Mrs. Gates’s domestic policy, I lost it here, to find myself in the rick-yard, taking part, against my will, in some complicated sporting affray.

‘And there were three of them, father, in the trough; and I crept up and got the gun-barrel through a hole in the side of the sty, and just as the old buck-rat——’

And then it was Mr. Parrett again.

‘Emma ’ull tell ye b-b-better ’n me, Jane. It came hoot-tooting round the corner, and afore I could s-s-s——’

‘Stop, George?’

‘N-n-nonsense!—afore I could s-s-s——’

‘Seize hold o’ the——?’

'Emma, do bide quiet!—afore I could s-s-say Jack Robinson, the ould mare, she b-b-backed upon her harnches, and she——'

And from Miss Matilda :

'Oh! I should so love to, Mr. Weaverly! Is there a very beautiful view? And could we walk there and back in an afternoon, do you think?'

And from Farmer Coles, folding up his napkin :

'Well, if no one wunt have no more——'

The rest was lost in the rustle of Mrs. Coles's skirts, as she uprose.

'And now, William dear, I think we ladies will leave you to your smoke. And when you are quite ready, we will have a rubber and a little music.'

In the drawing-room presently, the farmer and his wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Parrett, sat down to a solemn, silent game of whist. A 'Happy Family' party made a vortex of merriment in a far corner. At the piano stood Mr. Weaverly, translating into soft melodious trifles such songs as 'The Wolf' and 'Hearts of Oak.' As for me, I was happy in the great chair with the family portrait album, full of early Victorian photographs, which I sincerely believe to be amongst the most fascinating and informing productions of all that fertile reign. But after an hour of this inspiring occupation, I was suddenly roused to

the contemplation of a still greater wonder. One of the card-players had spoken, and that sharply.

‘Emma! Emma, my dear!’

I strolled over, and watched the play. Something had happened to disturb Mr. Parrett, for though his face was turned from me, I could see that his bald head had taken on a purple hue. And gradually, as the game progressed, the mystery became clear.

‘Emma, my d-d-dear! Emma!’

It was Mr. Parrett’s voice again, and this time with a sharper ring of warning and remonstrance. Two or three times in the next half-hour he spoke thus, and each time now I was able to detect the cause. Mrs. Parrett was cheating. Continually her neck craned for a sidelong view of her opponents’ cards. She revoked unblushingly. Once I could have sworn I saw a card-corner sticking out of a fold in her silken lap. The aces she seemed to be trying to mark with her thumb-nail. And all the time, though Mr. Parrett got momentarily redder and more wrathful, Farmer Coles and his wife sat serenely smiling, evidently well used to dear Emma and her little harmless, eccentric ways.

III

Here is a winter's day already, and still November. As I looked forth at sunrise this morning, the whole village was white with frost. I could hear the ice in the wheel-ruts crackling under the tread of passers-by. A single thrush piped forlornly somewhere in the dense thicket of the churchyard. And as I leaned out into the nipping blast, a word came up to me, bandied between a trudging labourer and his friend, a word that brought with it an entire new sheaf of thoughts and memories. 'More 'n 'aaf like Christmas, bean't ut, Bill?' It was said but in jest, and that unthinkingly. Yet, by the calendar, as a glance now told me, Christmas was scarce a month away.

While the sun was yet no more than a white spot in the faint gold mists of morning, I took the lane that led to the Downs. It was strange to see how the frost had missed all the bright-hued berries in the hedgerows, and how the ivy-leaves were only rimmed with white. It was the same with the prickly holly foliage. The spines were thickly encrusted, while the dark green membranes of the leaves had given no fingerhold to the frost. But the colour of the grass, and dead dry herbage, by the wayside was completely blotted out. Every blade and twig stood up

stark and white against its fellow ; and here it was easy to see which way the frozen air had been drifting all night long, because on the windward side the pale accretion was thicker : in the more exposed places it more than doubled the natural girth of the stems.

Where the dew-pond lay, at the top of the hill, far above the swimming lowland mists, there must have been bright sunshine from the very first ; for here the veneer of frost had melted into dewdrops, that flashed back a thousand prismatic rays amidst the emerald of the grass at every step. But behind each upstanding tussock, the frost still held as white and thick as ever. The water, too, in the pond was still frozen over. As I came up to the rail, a flock of starlings rose whirring over my head. They had been waiting there on the sunny side of the bank for the ice to melt round the pond edges, and thither they would return to slake their morning thirst, as soon as I passed on.

Keen and unkindly blew the blast, so that one must keep ever moving to withstand the chill of it. Looking round me on the waste of hills, I could see that the northern slopes still retained their wintry hue, though all those facing to the sun were intensely green. Below in the valley only the oak-woods kept their bronze stain of autumn. Every other tree, the hedges that



THE FERRYMAN'S COTTAGE

divided ploughlands and meadows, the winding line of thicket marking the course of the river, all looked bare and dark in the glistening pallor of the sun. The river itself, between the broad water-meadows, seemed like a river of ink.

As I took in all the cheerless, void purity of what lay below me, thinking to myself that this indeed was winter, there came a sudden cawing and dawing high up in the frosty steel-blue dome of the sky; and here again was confirmation of that unenlivening fact. A great company of rooks and jackdaws was streaming by, but with none of its summer zest and purpose. The throng made a general progress towards the south, yet it was obviously doing little more than killing time, spinning out the business of a doubtful journey into the semblance of a morning's task. Instead of going straight forward in one steady strong tide, the birds were incessantly veering back in wide circles, crossing and re-crossing each other's paths aimlessly, and weaving a mazy dark pattern on the sky.

I watched this dubious host from the hill-top until it vanished in the eye of the sun; and then, fairly beaten at last by the razor-edged north wind, turned and went back to the village. It was winter again, in very truth; and there was little sense or profit in blinking it. I would strike my flag now, as I had struck it often before.

And the flag with me was the little staging of fernery that still concealed the yawning blackness of my study hearth. I pulled it all down and stowed it away; and by and by, when the ash logs were sizzling and glowing, and the sparks were volleying up the flue, and a living warmth pervading the room, I plucked up new heart and courage :

‘ No mirth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feel in any member ;
No warmth, no shine——’

It was all as false now as it must ever have been. And as for butterflies and bees, what but a sick fancy could crave for such delicacies out of season ?

DECEMBER

I

WE sat on the churchyard wall, the Reverend and I, debating many things.

It was one of those silent, gloomy afternoons that would be cold but for their exceeding stillness. A heavy grey pall of sky lowered overhead. A multitude of noisy sparrows was going to bed in the thicket of ilex and yew, denoting that the time was nearing sunset, although not a tinge of sunset colour showed in the shrouded west. The same impulse, it seemed, had brought us both out of doors, which, elementally, was nothing more than a sudden realisation of the impossibility of remaining within. In the whole year's round, perhaps, there come only two or three days like this. You become the prey of a conviction that something cataclysmic is going to happen. There is a sense of the world slowing down in its age-long, giddy race through the pathless ether; a feeling that its momentum is almost spent, and that any instant it may come

to a final stop, to be followed by the Last Trump and dissolution of all things. The mute house seems alive about you, and full of a sort of terror and foreboding. You are seized with an apprehension that the ceilings and roof are falling in ; and, hurrying forth, a like doubt comes upon you as to the stability of the sky : it looks so overburdened and unsafe. In this easeless, impotent frame of mind, I came up into the churchyard as being the most reassuring place I could think of, and found the Reverend wandering there for a like reason and in much the same mood.

‘ Wind and dirty weather coming,’ said he, ‘ the sort of times to make people think of home and fireside, the need for human peace on earth, and good-will towards men—the very weather for me.’

As we sat on the wall, silent awhile, the bells in far-off Stavisham began their chime, every note drifting over to us sharp and clear through the miles of torpid air.

‘ Winter coming,’ he went on ; ‘ the winter we all need once a year to knit us closer together. Listen to Saint Barnabas practising his Christmas carillons !—forging his link in the chain of bell-ringing that in a week or two will stretch all round the world. It is my time coming, my own time. For did you ever think how little

eyesight matters at Christmas? Blindness is nothing to a man then. Christmas is all glad sound; warm heart-beats; faithful words. And, please God, when the day dawns, there shall not be a cottage-nest in Windlecombe that does not overflow with these.'

To see him so deeply moved, and hear him run on presently about his many schemes of comfort and relief, the furtherance of joy and merriment, good-will and good cheer, to be sown broadcast throughout his little domain, was yourself to take the infection irresistibly. Whatever Christmas has become in the great outer world, in Windlecombe he held us year by year to all the old ideals and traditions. As I harkened to him, the black sky, the sullen, miasmatic air, lost their significance. I found myself thinking only of the golden light and undimmed azure that must eternally lie beyond and above it all. And now—though I might have heard it long ago, if I had had but the heart to look up and listen—there, high against the drab heaven, a lark soared and sang.

II

The dirty weather has come indeed. For many days I have not seen the tops of the hills. They have been hidden in the rain-clouds that have

been dragging ceaselessly over the combe. The rain has not seemed to fall, but to flow horizontally from west to east, a gliding white curtain of water-drops, hiding all but the nearest houses from the view. And yet, for all the deluge and the sobbing wind, the gloom, the cold, the miry ways, I would not change this solitary, inaccessible spot in England for the best of foreign sunshine, ease, and gaiety to be found by the Tideless Sea.

Perhaps, if winter is to be given a place at all in the calendar, it must come in these few weeks leading on to Christmas. It is true that, so far as the natural outdoor world is concerned, there is no winter, in the human conception of a season of decay and death. In an hour, when the sky lightened a little and the rain ceased its rattle on the window, I went out and found next year's corn greening the hill-side ; and in all the bare dark woodland there was not a twig without its new buds ripe and ready for another spring. The year's miracle-play was beginning all over again before its last lines were said.

Yet because, as the old vicar maintains, winter is a human necessity by reason of its heart-welding, neighbour-making qualities, winter we must all have ; and so at this time I am glad to hoodwink myself into the belief that the rough-voiced, harrying weather is the very negation of

life, bringing us all together for mutual comfort, like children in the dark.

The rain is over now, seemingly for good. Last night at sundown the wind fell, and the grey cloud canopy lifted off to the northward, like the opening lid of a box. As the dense cloud pack broke away from the western horizon, the sun burst through, and poured a sudden stream of red-gold light up thecombe. Before this light had paled, the whole sky was crystal clear; and in the east, just above the earth-line, shone the moon—a perfect human face, full-jowled, low-foreheaded, gazing down upon us all with a puzzled, quizzical smile upon her comfortable chops. I came up the street apostrophising her, and ran into a basket, and behind the basket was Grewes. He laid a bunch of lean bony fingers in my hand.

‘This is life again,’ he said feelingly. ‘To be weatherbound in a caravan, you know— Well, it is a little trying even for common people, but for a genius— Spelthorne, you see, cannot bear any constraint. At home he has a studio as big as a church, and when it rains he walks up and down it. But when he tries that in a caravan—! Really, I have been very sorry for him, though of course I kept outside as much as I could.’

I had turned and strolled back with him under

the pale December twilight. The new quiet of things, the frosty glimmer of the moon, here and there a star beginning to show, the renovated life of the village about us—all made for peace and content. Grewes suddenly stopped and laid his basket down.

‘Spelthorne wants to move on now,’ he told me; ‘he says we have painted the place out, and—— I haven’t tried to persuade him, you know, but—but—I don’t want to go, and that’s a fact.’

He looked at me distressfully, his stubbly lantern jaw in his lean hand.

‘What has happened to change the place so?’ he asked. ‘Everybody you meet looks as if bound for a wedding. You are all humming carol tunes wherever you go. I haven’t seen a dirty-faced child for a week. And how the people joke and laugh with each other! It can’t be all because Christmas——’

‘Yes, it is,’ said I, ‘it is all because one old man we love insists on having it so, year by year. He has been into every home in the village, great and small, and fired each man, woman, and child with his own rejoicing spirit. If you stop for the next ten days, you will see things change more thoroughly still. Wait till you see them bringing the Christmas-tree up the hill for the children’s treat! And the committee going

round on Boxing-Day to award the prizes for the home decorations! And if you have never heard real old-fashioned carols, nor listened to a real Christmas sermon preached by a holy angel in a white beard——'

He took up his basket hurriedly.

'If—if I must go,' he said, as we trudged on towards the quarry where the caravan had made its pitch, 'I shall think of you all wherever I—— It seems rather selfish to press him, don't you think? But perhaps—— Oh! here we are! Do come in and talk to Spelthorne for a bit, will you? He sees so little company, and——'

'Is that you at last, Grewes? My good fellow, what an unconscionable time to take in procuring no more than one pennyworth of pepper and just a pound of gravy beef! To say that I am excessively annoyed is wholly to understate my—— Of course all my carefully-thought-out plans for the meal are entirely upset!'

I drew back into the darkness.

'No, not to-night. There are times when you cannot stand—I mean, when a call is not convenient, and—— Why on earth don't you tell the selfish old brute to go to smithereens?'

III

This has been a week of undeniably hard work for us all, and one, at least, is by no means sorry that to-morrow is Christmas Eve.

Most of the time I seem to have spent on the top of a rickety step-ladder in the school-room, having tin-tacks and boughs of holly and gaily-coloured flags passed up to me by Mr. Weaverly and the mutually distrustful Miss Sweet and Miss Matilda Coles. Tom Clemmer, helped by half a dozen others, brought the great tree up from Windle Woods, and it stands now in its tub of spangled cotton-wool, a gorgeous sight, every branch weighed down with toy-shop treasures, the queen-doll at its apex brandishing her gilt-starred sceptre high up among the oaken beams of the ceiling. Every available chair or bench in the village has been confiscated, and ranged round the room. The tables at the far end fairly creak and groan under their burden of infantile good cheer. It is all ready for to-morrow. We put in the finishing touches with the last gleam of daylight this evening, Weaverly and I alone together. Then he locked the door, speechlessly tired and happy, and faded away—a black but benevolent ghost in goloshes—down the length of the darkening street.

As for me, I followed at a respectful distance

with no object definitely in view but to smoke a quiet pipe after the day's work, and enjoy the unwonted life and bustle of the village.

Thinking it over discriminately, it seemed to be a great thing, a real advance on the true line of social progress, to be strolling about there, taking unfeigned pleasure in the sight of two small shops doubtfully illuminated with oil-lamps and candles, and in the sound made by perhaps fifty people all told, as they clattered and chattered to and fro in a single, narrow village street. There were folk, I knew, wandering just as aimlessly in the crowded thoroughfares of great cities miles away, whose ears were deafened with a prodigious uproar, and eyes blinded by a myriad superfluous lights, but who were not half so entertained, so thoroughly instilled with the sense of being one in a hustling, happy Christmas multitude, as I. Then again, of all the thousands that the city promenader meets in the crush of a London street between one electric standard and the next, how many can he rightfully greet as neighbour, or even remember to have seen before? While here was I, after a good half-hour's loitering up and down, who had encountered none but old familiar faces, nor let one go by without the kind word or friendly glance exchanged. Truly the scale, the mere arithmetic of life goes for nothing :

it is the proportional, the relative, that counts. There was not so much folly as we imagine in the grave debate of the old philosophers as to how many angels could stand upon a pin's point.

I tarried awhile in the broad beam of light that fell from the window of the village store, and, in the company of a dozen other loiterers, feasted eyes on its Yule-tide splendour. From where I stood on the opposite side of the way, it seemed no less than a palace of glittering beauty. Candles of all colours in little tinselled sconces shone amidst the wares of everyday—bacon and worsted stockings, loaves of bread and tin saucepans, butter, neckties, bars of mottled soap, and trousers in moleskin or corduroy. The ceiling of the shop, which at ordinary times is hidden by hanging festoons of boots, basket-ware, hedging-gloves, coils of rope, was intersected now by chains of coloured paper and threadled holly-leaves. There was a suspended roasting-jack in a corner slowly twirling round a grand set-piece of Christmas knick-knacks; and there were two copper coalscuttles, the one filled with oranges, the other heaped high with bunches of green grapes that made the mouth water a dozen yards away. All these I gazed upon, and at the jostling throng of housewives, at least half a score, within, and at the red-faced, perspiring shopkeeper overdone with business; and

from the bottom of my heart, I rejoiced that they sufficed for me, that I should go to bed that night with as complete a sense of having looked on at the great world's Yuletide gladness as if I had tired out feet and eyes and nerves in the roaring maelstrom at the Elephant, or the Messina Strait of the Strand. For indeed life and its disciplines, its experiences, its outcomes, can be no mere matters of dimension: when we come at last to find eternity and the angels, they are as like to be on a pin's point as out-thronging all the labyrinth of the Milky Way.

From the village store I moved on presently to the little sweetstuff shop, and stood awhile looking in through the holly-garlanded door. Susan sat in a wilderness of scalloped silver paper, presiding over a lucky tub. There was no getting near her to-night for the mob of children that surrounded her, and overflowed into the street; but she bawled me an affectionate Christmas greeting, and passed me, by half a dozen intervening hands—in exchange for a thrown halfpenny—a packet from the lucky-dip, which proved to contain a cherubim modelled out of pink scented soap. With this symbolic testimony to our old-time friendship bulging my pocket, I went rambling on again, and in course of time arrived at the Three Thatchers Inn. A tilt-cart was just driving away from the door.

A numerous company was gathered outside, speeding the vehicle on its way with laugh and jest.

'Ye've not fared so bad,' roared old Daniel Dray, as he spied me in the darkness, 'though ye didn't come to th' drawin'. Ye've got a top-side, an' a hand o' pig-meat. Stall'ard here, he's got wan o' th' turkeys, an' young George Artlett th' tother. A good club it ha' been, considerin'. An' now the lot o' us ha' got to bide here 'til Dan'l gets hoame from Stavisham wi' th' tack.'

This annual prize-drawing, and division of the Christmas Club funds, with the subsequent wait in the cosy inn parlour while the things were fetched from the town, was a great event in Windlecombe. On this one night in the year, we cultivated as a fine art the pleasure of anticipation, and each did his best to make the time go with mirth and neighbourly good-will. The occasion was also, in some degree, a kind of benefit for the landlord, to which all might contribute as a duty, if by any chance the inclination lacked. Looking round the crowded room, I could think of hardly one of the well-known faces that was missing. The old ferryman was there—how he got there was a mystery; but there he was, in the corner of the settle whence he had been absent so long. Even George Artlett had stayed

to await the arrival of his turkey, and now sat at my side quaffing lemonade, his face as grave and thoughtful as ever, but his eyes twinkling with a jollity I had never seen in them before.

Young Daniel knew that no one would desire to curtail this part of the prize-drawing ceremony, and there was little fear of his wheels being heard in the sloppy street for a good two hours to come. We stretched out our legs to the cheery blaze, and felt that for once we had succeeded in wing-clipping old Father Time.

'Beef-club drawin' agen, Dan'l!'

'Ay! beef-club drawin' agen, Tom.'

In a break in the general clamour, the two veterans exchanged the thought slowly and pensively, looking down their long pipe-stems into the fire.

'An' no one gone, Dan'l.'

'Ne'er a wan, Tom, thank God.'

'How quirk 'a do hould hisself, to be sure,' said old Tom Clemmer after a pause, and none doubted who he meant. 'Ah! an' how 'a do brisk along still! Another year o' him by—'tis another blessin'. Here 's to un, wi' all our love an' dooty!'

It was a silent toast, but drunk deep. George Artlett's glass was lighter than any when he set it down.

'But 'tain't been allers so,' old Clemmer went

on ruminatively. 'How many drawin's ha' ye seen, Dan'l, boy an' man?—threescore belike, and I bean't fur ahent ye. An' many's th' time as summun's money ha' laid on th' table wi' only widder or poor-box to claim it; an' he, poor soul, quiet i' th' litten-yard up there. Ay! 'tis a lucky drawin' wi' nane but livin' hands to draw.'

Daniel Dray took up the prize-list and scanned it curiously, his white head thrown back, his spectacles straddling the extreme tip of his nose.

'An' what,' said he, 'will a single man, on-married, do wi' a whole gurt turkey-burd? An' him wi' never a wife! 'Tis wicked waste, neighbours! Him an' th' parrot, they'll ha' nought but turkey-meat i' th' house from now to Lady-time.'

Stallwood's beady black eyes disappeared in a wide smile.

'I knowed a man once,' he said, 'out in Utah State in Murriky, 'twur—as got a brace o' ostriches at a Christmas drawin'; an' when it come to carvin' at dinner-time, th' pore feller, he got no more 'n half a bite fer hisself because——' He stopped, suddenly recollecting George Artlett's lustrating presence, 'Ah! he wur married, I tell ye, an' never a wured o' a lie!'

‡ What'll 'a do wi' it, Dan'l?' The old ferry-

man leant from his corner eagerly, staring at the wall as though he saw there the picture that rose in his mind. 'What 'll 'a do wi' it? Jest think on't! Nobbut hisself in a quiet kitchen o' Christmas morning—his boots on, an' nane to rate un for spannellin' about—click-clack from the roastin' jack, an' tick-tack from th' clock, an' a good cuss now an' agen from th' ould parrot, but never a wured o' wimmin's wrath. Ah, life!—'tis all jest a gurt beef-club drawin'! Some on us draws peace an' quiet an' turkey-burds, an' some draws——'

His lips closed on his pipe-stem with a snap. A commiserate shake of the head went round the company.

'An' here,' went on old Daniel, still conning the prize-list, 'here be Jack Farley wi' bare money an' fower ounces o' tobacker—him as doan't smoke, an' has sixteen i' family. Lor', Jack! how that there deuce-ace do foller ye i' life!'

Jack Farley sat in the draughtiest seat by the door, his invariable modest choice of station. No one had ever seen him without a smile on his emaciated, sun-blackened face; and now he was smiling more determinedly than ever.

'I dunno', Dan'l,' he expostulated gently. 'Twur a real double-six when 'er an' me come together all they years ago. An' th' chillern,

they be good throws, every wan. An' that there noo little 'un, Dan'l—nauthin' o' th' deuce-ace about him, I tell ye! But them as putts to sea, Dan'l, they must look fer rough weather, time and agen.'

He squared himself and gazed about him as though his weekly carter-wage of fourteen shillings were as many pounds. Then he beat his mug upon the table jovially. 'An' now,' said he, 'I'll sing ye "Th' Mistletoe Bough!"'

It was the beginning of the real entertainment of the evening. Vocal music in the Three Thatchers at ordinary times was accounted a rather disreputable thing—a mere tap-room vulgarity—by the habitual parlour company; but on certain rare nights in the year, of which this was one, every man present was expected to sing. One by one now, in Jack Farley's wake, followed the rest of the assembly, and every song had a chorus that shook the very roof-beams of the house. No man thought of looking at the clock until, in the midst of a doleful melody from the landlord, old Tom Clemmer suddenly sprang to his one available foot.

''Tis th' cart!' he cried, and made for the door. In the general stampede after him, I heard Captain Stallwood's grumbling voice:

'Ut bean't right nohow fer people as caan't use tobacker to draw un away from them as can.

I means to ha' that there fower ounces, Dan'l. An' Jack Farley—th' ould swab !—'a must make out as best 'a can wi' th' turkey-burd.'

IV

' Yes, I can see it,' said the Reverend, ' plainer than the sun in a midday sky.'

With a taper at the end of a long cane, I had just ignited the last of the candles, and the great Christmas-tree stood up before us, clad, from its bole to its highest twig, in a shimmering garment of light. We two were alone in the schoolroom, but beyond the closed door, we knew, was Mr. Weaverly; and, beyond him again, a sea of expectant faces filling the wide porch, and stretching out half across the street under the still, frost-bound night. Every child that was not whispering excitedly to its neighbour, was crooning to itself with irrepressible joy; and the sound came to us through the solid timber like the sound of a bee-hive just going to swarm.

' Now open the door,' said the Reverend, getting into his corner. ' And if you miss a single thing, I 'll haunt you when I am gone to the end of your miserable life.'

I turned the key in the lock, and retreated hastily. The door flung open. I saw the black form of Mr. Weaverly flicker aside, and expected

the whole room to be invaded in a minute by an avalanche of scrambling, vociferating mites. But it did not happen so.

‘Not one has come in yet,’ said I, over the Reverend’s shoulder. ‘They are just peering in at the door. I can see thirty faces, perhaps, with thirty mouths, and twice as many eyes, opened wide; but never a smile among the lot. How quiet they keep! But now trembling fingers are coming round the doorposts, and a boot or two has got beyond the threshold. The reluctant vanguard is being pressed forward by those behind. They are creeping in now at last. The crowd has divided, and they are edging up the room right and left, keeping their shoulders against the walls. And all the time every wide-open eye remains fixed upon the tree in awe-struck delight. You hear that low whispering note? They are beginning to find their voices again, and the girls are at last venturing to let go one another’s hands. They are all in now, I think. At least the room could hardly hold another——’

And just as a failing mill-dam begins to ooze, then to trickle and spurt, and finally, in a moment gives way before the pressing tide, so the silence now broke down under the flood of child-voices. Shouts and hurrahs, shrill peals of laughter, a hubbub of delighted commentary, made the

rafters vibrate above us, and the window-glass tremble in its quarries. Before the din had so far moderated that I could get my tongue to work again in the old vicar's service, Weaverly and his satellites were forging ahead with the first joyful business of the night.

It all comes back to me now—as I sit alone and late by my workroom fire—clearer perhaps than when I was in the vortex of it all, with the happy voices ringing about me, and the toy-drums and trumpets, the mouth-organs and the whistle-pipes, each going to swell the already deafening chorus the moment it was cut from the tree and put into some eager, uplifted hand. I can see the great glittering pyramid of the tree slowly giving up its treasures, until it bears nothing but the queen-doll waving her star-tipped wand up among the flags and paper chains and holly garlands of the ceiling. I see Weaverly, poised on the top of the rickety ladder, gingerly dislodging her from her perch, while two overdressed and over-perfumed ladies hold the ladder firm below, and gaze up at him with fond and anxious eyes.

Now at last I see the Christmas-tree deserted, forgotten, while the tables at the end of the room are unloading themselves of their cakes and oranges and the score of other items appertaining to the feast. This is a silent time, save for the

exploding crackers and occasional shrieks of fearsome delight ; but it is over at last. The games begin, and with them reawakens all the old turmoil in redoubled fury. Though each of us has eaten more than is credible in any but a Downland-bred child, this in no way impairs our agility. We hunt the slipper ; we sing ourselves hoarse with ' Green Gravel ' ; we play ' Blind Man's Buff,' and the Reverend, being caught, is allowed to go through the part of Blind Man, at his own jovial suggestion, without the handkerchief over his eyes.

And now two things come back to me more significant than all. But for this busy quarter of an hour—when he is staggering to and fro, clutching at pinafores and shock heads of hair—the Reverend has been rather a silent and deliberate figure in the midst of all the madcap business, more detached and quiet than I have known him at other Christmas gaieties bygone. He has hovered about on the fringe of the merry-making, happy-faced as ever, yet with a certain slowness, a languor, that I have never marked in him before. This is the one thing. The other is a random glance I take over my shoulder at the Christmas-tree, when the fun and frolic are at their highest. Pathetically forlorn and deserted it looks, with bits of string clinging here and there to its drooping green fronds, a single

shining trinket hanging forgotten on one of its lower branches, and half its glory already quenched. As I look at it, every moment sees another candle gutter out and die. A few minutes more, I think, and it will be nothing but a sombre and solemn fir-tree again, ready to be carted down and set once more amidst the silent glooms of the wood. Somehow, in spite of myself, the two things, the two thoughts, blend themselves indivisibly together. I am glad now that, while through the long evening I poured into the Reverend's patient ear much idle chatter and many feather-brained conceits, I said no word to him about the dying Christmas-tree.

While I have been sitting here, turning over these thoughts, my own candles have burned low: the wood-fire has sunk to a few waning embers: it must be growing late, how late I do not guess until I turn to look at the clock. Almost midnight! Another minute or two, and then—Christmas morning! Perhaps, as the night is so clear and still, I shall be able to hear the hour chime in far-off Stavisham. I go to the window, throw back the casement against the rustling ivy, and look forth.

There is the glimmer of a lantern over by the Seven Sisters on the green, and a sound of people talking quietly together. I think I can distinguish George Artlett's deep tones, and his

brother Tom's—the Singing Plowman's—higher, clearer speech, and an admonitory word or two that might be Weaverly's. The clock is striking now. Before its last droning note dies on the frosty air, the darkness beneath me fills with a living, joyous music :

' Hark ! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King,
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies ;
With the angelic host proclaim,
" Christ is born in Bethlehem."
Hark ! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King !'

560

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